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# Upskilling marginalised South Asian women based in the United Kingdom through a home decor social enterprise: A collaborative training framework

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## Abstract

The international fashion industry is heavily reliant on Asian manufacturers, and garment workers are predominantly South Asian women, who work in deplorable conditions and face abuse from their employers. Furthermore, despite the growing demand for British-made goods, the fashion and textile manufacturing industry in the United Kingdom (UK) is facing a severe shortage of skilled machinists, also due to Brexit and the increasing disinterest of young people in learning making skills. Within this context, this paper reports on a project aimed at developing and testing a collaborative training framework for social enterprises wanting to upskill marginalised South Asian women and support their employment within the fashion and textile industry. To meet this aim, semi-structured interviews, a series of co-creation workshops, and a focus group were conducted as part of participatory action research conducted in the UK. Findings from the primary and secondary research validated the need for collaborative training programmes, while the delivery of the co-creation workshops aided in the development of a guidebook. The paper proposes a framework and discusses how it can be adopted and adapted by social entrepreneurs who want to upskill marginalised South Asian women in the fashion and textile industry. In conclusion, the paper highlights the original contribution of the research to the theory and practice of social entrepreneurship and outlines recommendations for further work.

**Keywords:** Ethical fashion, Skills training, Co-creation framework, Social entrepreneurship

## Introduction

International clothing companies and high-end luxury brands frequently collaborate with manufacturers in countries such as India, Bangladesh, China and Vietnam (McCosker, 2023). However, this practice often gives rise to unethical supply chain issues, leading to the exploitation of disadvantaged artisan communities, primarily composed of women in these countries (Lewis, 2021). Despite public awareness of this situation, the problem persists.

Consumer attitudes towards unsustainable working conditions are changing, and companies risk falling behind and losing some of their customers if they do not embrace this shift. A growing number of people are interested in craft and design, especially considering requests to empower artisan communities and the devastating effects the pandemic has had on artisan labour (EDITED, 2021). The COVID-19 outbreak compelled retailers to re-evaluate their operations, pushing them towards a more sustainable and ethical approach (EDITED, 2021). In today's environment, simply purchasing artisanal goods is insufficient and can be seen as inauthentic. Companies need to engage artisans from the outset of the design process and ensure that they receive a guaranteed living wage throughout the supply chain to empower the artisans who create their products (EDITED, 2021).

### *Higher unemployment rates for ethnic minority women in London*

London has a higher unemployment rate for women from ethnic minority backgrounds. Women from BAME (black, Asian, and minority ethnic) backgrounds experience an unemployment rate of 8.1% compared to a rate of 3.3% for women from a white ethnic group (Devine, 2022). According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the unemployment rate for BAME women increased by two-thirds between the end of 2019 and 2020; that is from 5.8% to 9.5% (TUC, 2021). Ethnic minority groups in Central London Forward (14.9%) and the South London Partnership (13.3%) experience higher inequalities compared to white citizens in the same regions (6.9% and 5.3%, respectively) (Volterra Partners LLP, 2021). Central London Forward (CLF) is a sub-regional alliance representing 12 local authorities in Central London, while the South London Partnership is a sub-regional partnership of five London boroughs.

### *Exploitation of South Asian artisans under invisible global supply chains*

The term ‘invisible’ is used as a metaphor for how supply chains are not transparent to consumers and the public. Pledging to stop violating workers’ rights and making that happen are two different things in the fashion industry. The same brands that insist on the utmost ethical standards in front of the public then demand clothes to be manufactured at an unsustainable pace and overly low price and this leads to worker’s rights abuses (Kent, 2020). The laws which are supposed to protect these artisans are commonly ignored or not implemented properly throughout the supply chain (Kent, 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been increasing reports of wage theft and increased debt among artisans (Kent, 2021a). In this regard, Alexander Kohnstamm, executive director at Fair Wear Foundation stated: *“I don’t think we should continue to do what we have done for the last twenty years. We need much more drastic and ambitious change. To do that, we need new business models”* (Kent, 2021a, p. 2).

With this research context in mind, the project presented in this paper aimed to develop and test a collaborative training framework for social enterprises wanting to upskill marginalised South Asian women and support their employment within the fashion and textile industry.

To meet this aim, the following objectives were set out:

- To critically review theories and practices of social enterprises training disadvantaged women;
- To conduct co-creation workshops in order to elicit issues related to training/upskilling artisans/workers as well as opportunities for upcycling surplus fabrics;
- To develop a collaborative training framework and test it within the context of a home decor social enterprise.

### **Literature review**

Today’s fast-paced mass market and globalised fashion industry have given rise to complex and unfair supply chains that are filled with labour infractions — ranging from low pay and overwork to dangerous working conditions, exploitation of child labour and modern-day slavery (Kent, 2021b). Addressing these supply chain issues requires a focus on understanding how businesses are engaging with local communities and labour organisations, while also ensuring the inclusion of the workforce and their representatives (Kent, 2021b). In the future, there needs to be a system of collaboration and legally binding agreements with labour unions (Kent, 2021b).

The UK’s fashion sector has experienced significant growth, with retail sales of apparel quadrupling between 1998 and 2018, reaching £60 billion (Fashion Revolution, 2022). British brands and retailers must

adopt more sustainable and responsible practices, including transparent supply chains. Surprisingly, no British brand or retailer made it to the top 10 in the Fashion Transparency Index for 2022 (Fashion Revolution, 2022). The Fashion Transparency Index is defined as the annual evaluation of 250 of the world's biggest fashion retailers and brands graded according to their level of public transparency on human rights and environmental policies, practices, and impacts in their operations and supply chains (Fashion Revolution, 2022). In this regard, Mostafiz Uddin, owner and managing director of Denim Expert Ltd., Bangladesh, claims (Fashion Revolution, 2022, p. 32): *"I think transparency is the future because it has the power to establish trust among people in the supply chain which is essential for the existence of all of us on this planet"*.

Transparency allows workers, labour unions, human rights organisations and others the ability to quickly notify clothing brands of labour violations occurring in the factories that are supplying them, allowing them the option to react, halt and resolve rights abuses at an early stage (Fashion Revolution, 2022). Transparency facilitates brand collaboration and partnership working towards minimising, stopping and preventing labour exploitation within supply chains (Robledo & Triebich, 2020). However, consumers currently lack the information needed to make conscious choices and hold businesses accountable for labour conditions since the origin of their garments remains unknown. Consumers are interested in learning where garment workers are employed in the supply chain as well as whether those who make their products are capable of advocating for themselves for better working conditions (Muller, 2020).

Moreover, the fashion industry's complex and constantly changing global network of manufacturers poses significant challenges that cannot be tackled by any single entity alone (Kent, 2020). Despite public demands for stricter guidelines and companies' claims of responsible sourcing, labourers still endure harsh conditions and meagre wages. In a report published in 2019, the UK House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee voiced concerns that e-commerce companies such as Boohoo were pressuring UK manufacturers to agree to pay illegally low wages (Kent, 2020). If brands want to address the issues of fair wages and labour exploitation in the fashion industry, they must re-evaluate how they negotiate with suppliers and maintain their value chains.

Everlane and other direct-to-consumer businesses have demonstrated how transparent pricing and suppliers may attract customers, but this business model has not yet been adopted by the majority of the industry (Kent, 2019). Manufacturers and sourcing professionals claim that companies continue to frequently change vendors to attain the cheapest bargain, commonly preferring countries having weak labour regulations (Kent, 2020). Nevertheless, there is growing recognition within the fashion industry that true transformation can only be achieved through collaboration and involvement of all relevant stakeholders, even if progress is gradual and challenging (Amen et al., 2021).

To tackle some of the above-mentioned challenges, designers are increasingly engaging in social innovation processes, acting as agents of change and collaborating with communities and other stakeholders to co-create services, strategies and systems (Mazzarella et al., 2021). Social innovations can be defined as "new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations" (Murray et al., 2010, p. 3). For such innovations to have a meaningful impact, they must be co-created with designers, artisans/workers, consumers and stakeholders.

Additionally, cultural translation is essential to ensure that these innovations align with contextual factors,

addressing the important aspects of social acceptance and preference, which are often overlooked (Meroni & Selloni, 2018). Designers can play a role not only in developing social innovations but also in shaping new social entrepreneurial models for sustaining and scaling such initiatives (Selloni & Corubolo, 2017). Social entrepreneurs play a significant role in the field of social innovation because their mission is to create opportunities for inclusion. Their social impact activities are commonly focused on economic, social and community development; employment and training; and social services (Drencheva & Stephan, 2014).

With these sustainability challenges in mind, the research presented in this paper focused on London, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK, whose fashion and textile industry is affected by social inequalities and limited access to good job opportunities. For instance, in boroughs like Waltham Forest, which has a diverse ethnic population and lower average income compared to the London average, there is an evident disparity in pay and employment rates among BAME groups (A New Direction, 2019). Unfortunately, the creative sector in London, particularly the fashion industry in East London, lacks diversity and connectivity, leaving the Asian community and former textile workers with limited employment prospects (A New Direction, 2019). This emphasises the need for an encouraging network to foster collaborations between designers and makers (Mazzarella & Black, 2023). The rise of fast fashion has further contributed to the loss of specialised technical skills and a shortage of skilled labour, jeopardising the preservation of London's heritage fashion and textile expertise (Mazzarella & Black, 2023). Therefore, upskilling potential employees and protecting existing skilled labour becomes imperative. In response to the problems faced by South Asian workers in the fashion industry and the demand for a transparent supply chain, sustainable business models should focus on training workers locally and implementing ethical practices, ensuring safe working conditions.

To understand these challenges and identify opportunities for empowering marginalised women, two case studies were conducted by reviewing business reports. Images 1 and 2 synthesise the findings from the case studies on Making for Change and Sewing Friendship. Making for Change in the UK is an exemplary organisation based in London aimed at empowering disadvantaged women through skills training. The Making for Change fashion training and manufacturing unit was developed as a collaboration between London College of Fashion, UAL, and HM Prison Service (Caulfield et al., 2018). The Thusa Batho Sewing for Africa community sewing project, which is based in Durban, can be used to demonstrate how higher education and society can collaborate to challenge prejudice, tribalism and racism through community participation (Mutero et al., 2021). The case studies showcase the importance of co-creation processes in eliminating workers' exploitation and supporting local communities and highlight the need for collaborative training programmes in this context.

CORE PROJECT OBJECTIVES	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide training that will lead toward high-quality garment manufacturing</li> <li>2. Deliver industry-recognised qualifications that can be replicated and rolled out to other women's prisons.</li> <li>3. Source garment manufacturing jobs for the women who are eligible for release, and in so doing support the London garment manufacturing industry.</li> <li>4. Break down the barriers for women offenders to find and stay in work through the development and recognition of high-quality skills as a desirable commodity within the UK textile and manufacturing industry.</li> <li>5. Reduce re-offending among the project participants.</li> </ol>
WORKING MODEL	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The workshop provides a safe space for women to learn and develop skills which lead towards level 1 and level 2 ABC qualifications in fashion &amp; textiles. The workshop also produces items for commercial customers, providing participants with real work experience as part of their training.</li> <li>2. Participants learn how to manage, plan and use their time constructively, how to behave in a professional environment, and how to motivate themselves to complete work tasks and learning activities. As well as gaining life and employability skills, Making for Change aims to assist participants in building the emotional, intellectual and spiritual strength that can help to make them resilient against re-offending.</li> </ol>
OUTCOME	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improvements in mental health and well-being</li> <li>2. Improvements in social skills and confidence</li> <li>3. Improved aspirations for a positive, crime-free future</li> </ol>

*Image 1: Case study on Making for Change.*

CORE PROJECT OBJECTIVES	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide training in sewing to the migrant and unemployed population in Durban by capacitating skills development training for employment or self-employment.</li> <li>2. To study the role of engaged scholarship in the creation and development of inclusive shared spaces for migrant and local populations.</li> <li>3. To design workshop cycles with the objective to promote participatory, shared social spaces.</li> </ol>
WORKING MODEL	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The training programme was designed and facilitated by the three women.</li> <li>2. The partnership aspect of the project is fashioned as a student service-learning project that involves fashion students from the HEIs partnering with Thusa Batho trainees on a collaborative design project. Collaboration, co-creation, and participatory design are central themes in this aspect of the project.</li> <li>3. The three-month-long collaborative design project entails the sewing of a garment that the three women trainers have agreed on. As an outcome, Thusa Batho participants receive certificates for their participation in the programme.</li> <li>4. Inclusion in a shared social space was inculcated through activities such as sharing sewing machines, cutting fabrics, and cleaning the sewing space collectively.</li> </ol>
OUTCOME	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Results show that inclusive, shared social spaces can be used as resources to facilitate both individual and group change through initiating shared problem-identification and solving processes that can have a long-term impact on the community.</li> <li>2. Thusa Batho, then not only became a site to acquire skills but also, created a space where women could connect and explore their awareness of each other as a result of the interaction and participation that the project bolsters.</li> </ol>

*Image 2: Case study on Sewing Friendship.*

## Research methodology

The research project presented in this paper had an emancipatory and exploratory purpose (Robson, 2002), as it aimed to create opportunities for disadvantaged South Asian women in the UK and to drive social change. Since limited research exists on upskilling this specific group, the project also explored the potential impact of collaborative training programmes in enhancing their skills and career prospects. The research adopted an interpretivist philosophy (Saunders & Tosey, 2013) to gain subjective insights into how local stakeholders can aid disadvantaged women in obtaining the necessary training for supporting secure livelihoods. This project employed an inductive research approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), as qualitative

data was collected to understand the impact of collaborative training programmes on upskilling underprivileged South Asian women in the UK and subsequently used to inform the development of a conceptual framework.

Participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) was the chosen research strategy for this project, as it sought to develop a collaborative framework to empower disadvantaged South Asian women with improved employment opportunities. The first author of this paper actively collaborated with stakeholders and facilitated a co-creation process to develop the training framework. The research employed a non-probability sampling strategy, specifically purposive sampling (Mays & Pope, 1995), to select organisations and social entrepreneurs in the UK based on specific criteria such as location, expertise and roles. However, unforeseen circumstances necessitated the inclusion of a new organisation in a different setting, leading to the use of opportunistic sampling (Robson, 2002). To meet the research aim and objectives, multiple data collection methods were used in the project.

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted via MS Teams with industry professionals with in-depth knowledge relevant to the research subjects, as summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1: Industry professional participants.*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Job Role</b>	<b>Expertise</b>
Olusola McKenzie	Founder and Director – Learn to Recreate	Learn to Recreate is a social enterprise which provides a bridge between the fashion industry and access to entry-level opportunities.
Anna Ellis	Head of Business Development – Making for Change	Making for Change is an award-winning project offering women prisoners a route away from re-offending whilst addressing a skills shortage within the UK fashion manufacturing industry.
Dr Seher Mirza	Founder – S Jo	S Jo is a social enterprise which creates original accessories, drawing inspiration from traditional textile craftsmanship handcrafted by artisans, mainly women from villages in Pakistan.
Olivia Weber	Creative Director – Olivia Lara (previously, Trashion Factory)	Founder of a non-profit company that promotes upcycling and with experience in delivering free craft workshops to women, providing a safe space for women to meet up and get creative, as well as learn making skills.

The researcher and first author of this paper also facilitated co-creation workshops over two days in collaboration with the Eastleigh Gurkha Nepalese Association (EGNA), a charity organisation based in Southampton, UK. Nepali women with no prior sewing experience participated in the workshops, receiving training in machine sewing and hand embroidery, and created upcycled home decor products using surplus fabrics. The workshops were conducted to validate the need for collaborative training programmes aimed at upskilling disadvantaged South Asian women in the UK. This process contributed to the development



of a framework and explored how co-creation workshops can be used to effectively upcycle surplus fabrics and empower disadvantaged South Asian women through upskilling.

At the end of the workshop series, a focus group was conducted with the participating women, who shared their insights on the effectiveness, challenges and benefits of the training programme being developed. The focus group played a crucial role in testing and refining the collaborative training framework for a home decor social enterprise. The data captured for the research project (i.e. the audio recordings of the interviews and focus group, as well as field notes collected at the workshops and focus group) was thematically analysed, following the method described by Miles and Huberman (1994), encompassing data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. Nvivo software aided in coding the data, identifying main themes and sub-themes and colour-coding each theme and quote for clarity.

## Findings

The analysis of the data collected through the semi-structured interviews revealed five main themes and corresponding sub-themes, as depicted in image 3.

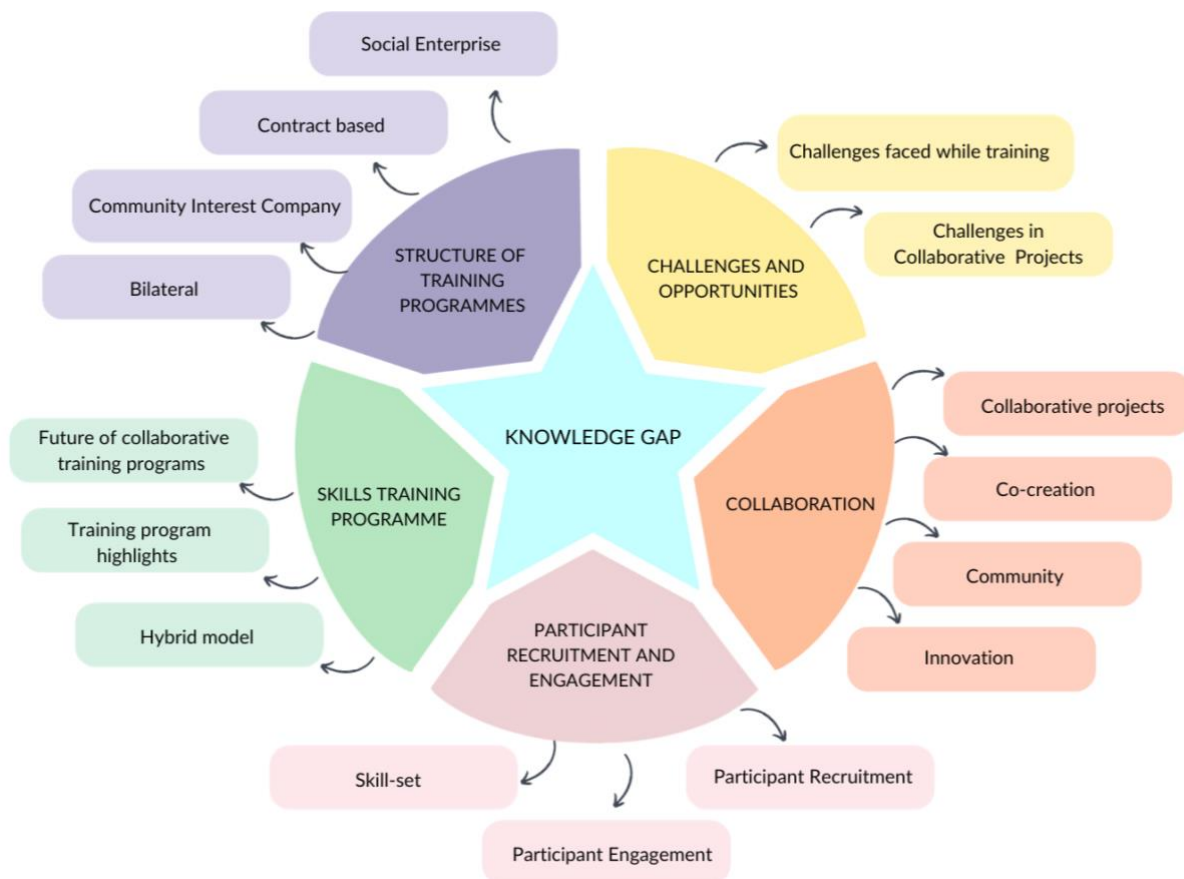


Image 3: Themes and sub-themes emerging from the analysis of the data collected through interviews.

### Collaboration

Collaboration was a concept consistently emphasised by all four social entrepreneurs; in fact, the word ‘collaboration’ was mentioned 36 times in the interviews. Three participants highlighted the additional benefits gained through collaborating with other organisations, expressing their willingness to engage



in future partnerships. Additionally, all four participants expressed their intent to continue collaborating with workers/artisans.

The participants referred to the concept of collaboration in terms of partnership projects, co-creation, community and innovation. Two participants mentioned that their collaborative approach involves disadvantaged women in product co-creation. Participant 2 creates a safe space for women to connect and openly discuss issues, contributing to the meaningful co-creation of products that hold value for each community member:

*“We explored issues that we like to talk about and visuals that are connected to that. So, we have a lot of nice feminist mornings talking about things. And then, through that, they developed symbols, letters, writings and visuals, which they embroider on their T-shirts. In the end, everybody had a T-shirt that they embroidered, and then I put all of these on my website with pictures from them and said that these are designed and made by them. Then, the community was able to vote [for] the T-shirts that they liked the most”.*

The collaborations aided three of the participants in forming a community of disadvantaged women who play a crucial role in their businesses. The interview findings revealed the feasibility of collaborating with multiple stakeholders simultaneously. Some interviewees formed communities with artisans/workers before facilitating co-creation processes, while others collaborated with organisations solely for training or product co-creation purposes. It was also stated that, since many brands outsource their production in the UK and do not deliver any local training, collaborative training workshop spaces are in demand.

#### *Participant recruitment and engagement*

The analysis of the interviews revealed that social entrepreneurs delivering training programmes and engaging in co-creation processes face challenges in recruiting and engaging with participants and need to tailor their offer to the skillset of the people they work with. The word ‘participants’ was mentioned 30 times across the interviews. All the interviewees, being social entrepreneurs working with disadvantaged groups of women, face unique challenges in participant recruitment. The interviewees highlighted the fact that sometimes participants do not complete the training programme or lose interest in the workshops. Although the training sessions were offered free of charge by the interviewed individuals and organisations, there have been instances where participants lost interest, as Participant 1 explained:

*“Because those are disengaged at that point, just let them go, but engage other people who are committed. They will gain value from it and will use it to their own advantage. I say that because, anytime something is communicated as free, and if they feel like you are the one that’s going to be advantaged by it and not the other way around, then it’s easy for people to abuse it.”*

The interviewees emphasised the importance of having a structured training programme with engaging and desirable spaces, moving away from mundane classroom settings. Effective communication and providing incentives can also foster participant commitment. Creating an environment that encourages experimental co-creation enables participants to feel a sense of ownership over the products they contribute to. A challenge discussed by the interviewees is the need to accommodate participants with varying skill levels. Training programmes often involve people who already have sewing skills and attend the sessions to reach

a professional level, alongside others who are beginners. Interviewee 4 highlighted that participants seek to acquire skills in high demand due to the UK's shortage of skilled machinists.

### *Structure of training programmes*

The analysis of the data collected via the interviews contributed to understanding how social entrepreneurs structure their training programmes and identifying various methods used by relevant organisations, along with their respective advantages and disadvantages. This theme was mentioned 27 times in the interviews. The different structures of training programmes included a community interest company, a 'bilateral working model', a social enterprise and a 'contract-based working model' which was further subdivided into grants and training programmes. Each working model operates differently, yet they share similarities in terms of collaboration. However, working on contracts poses challenges, as participants are not financially committed, making it problematic if they lose interest and quit the training programme, impacting the facilitators. Participant 1 provided valuable insights on delivering programmes supported by external grants:

*"Our approach mainly entails delivering contract-based activities. [...] If it was possible, I think we would always just settle for and work only with grants. Grants that don't put additional layers of contractual obligations. That would be our preferred way of working".*

As stated by Participant 2, a community interest company needs to have a social purpose to receive funding from larger organisations to support skills training workshops for women and community members.

A bilateral working model was described by Participant 3, who works in a social enterprise collaborating with artisans to co-create products. This approach ensures equal access to information, training workshops and a platform for feedback and discussion among the artisans. Building personal relationships with the artisans fosters a supportive and comfortable space where they can share their stories and interact with others, enabling them to fit the training within their schedules. Participant 3 described the 'bilateral working model' as follows:

*"If you think of it in terms of a diagram, it would be me directly interacting with all the artisans who I work with and doing workshops in the village where I work. I meet everybody, and we sit together. And there is a bilateral dialogue or communication. So, it's not through a leader within the community. I mean, there are leaders within the community, those manage materials, or manage the petty cash and things like that".*

Participant 4 highlighted the fact that the social enterprise model offers training programmes and industry-recognised credentials through their collaboration with a university. This model also enables women to apply for jobs and secure employment in making products for commercial clients. According to Participant 4:

*"We have many parts of Making for Change, working with the community, working with the prisons and also our manufacturing unit here at Poplar Works and at HMP Downview, which is the women's prison. We take commercial orders, we manufacture for designers of small brands, or we collaborate with bigger retailers. The idea behind the social enterprise is really to enable us to employ some of the women that we train as part of our programme".*

The different approaches to collaborative training programmes, as shown in Table 2, provided valuable insights into effective practices and potential pitfalls. Each model has its advantages and disadvantages; understanding these aspects is crucial for developing an effective collaborative training framework, which should align with the organisation's vision and strategy, cater to its specific context and community and ultimately benefit all the stakeholders involved.

*Table 2: Summary of findings from the interviews, which informed the development of the framework and the design of the structure of the co-creation workshop series.*

Working model	Findings
Contract-based Model	Working with grants that have fewer contract obligations is beneficial because it allows for greater flexibility when delivering training programmes.
Community Interest Company	Having a social purpose aids in obtaining funding and supporting disadvantaged people.
Bilateral Model	Connecting with the people who receive training is effective because it fosters a sense of community and creates a safe environment in which everyone can exchange ideas within a co-creation process.
Social Enterprise	Progression pathways are important within social enterprises which train trainers. This means recognising those participants in the training programme who have become skilled enough to be hired to train other women, amplifying the impacts of the work/project.

### *Challenges and opportunities*

The interviewees mentioned 'challenges' 23 times in the interviews. The data analysis contributed to understanding the challenges faced while delivering training programmes and collaborative projects. Amongst the common issues faced during skills training programmes, the interviewees highlighted language barriers between participants (often non-English speakers) and workshop facilitators. Attendance and participants' commitment to training programmes also resulted as recurring concerns. For instance, Participant 2, who delivers training workshops for other organisations, faces challenges in terms of insufficient sewing machines or storage space when the workshops are delivered over several days. Conversely, some challenges occurred in reverse when partner organisations had all the necessary resources, and the social entrepreneur's role was solely to train people. Additionally, one interviewee shared a negative experience while collaborating with NGOs and larger organisations due to misalignment in values/objectives, as mentioned below:

*"With larger organisations, sometimes there is a danger of their agendas being quite different. What are their motivations? Is it just for corporate social responsibility? Why are they doing those things? I find that particularly difficult to navigate. So, I work directly with communities. Having worked with NGOs in the past, I'm not saying I wouldn't be open to working with them again, but I think that we have to align our objectives".*

### *Skills training programme*

The analysis of the data collected contributed also to understanding the concept of ‘training programme’, which was mentioned 14 times in the interviews and was further categorised into sub-themes: training programme highlights, the future of collaborative training programmes and the hybrid model. The interviewees provided feedback and advice on delivering effective collaborative training, and this input was considered during the development of the framework and the design of the co-creation workshop series. Participant 1 stated:

*“Go and speak with the individuals you want to work with, find out from them what they really want to do, and why. [...] If you don’t ‘parachute’ something into a community or try and impose something on someone, and if they feel like there’s some ownership because they have had some involvement in the creation of the course/programme, I think they’re more vested”.*

Understanding customer preferences is crucial in every business, and in this context, Participant 1’s statement emphasises the importance of comprehending what people aim to achieve in a co-creation workshop series. The goal is to foster a sense of shared ownership and belonging to a community that values their ideas and thoughts. The primary research findings also highlighted the importance of setting clear expectations for participants at the outset of the training programme to ensure a smooth delivery process. Designing the product to be created during the training and structuring the workshop format in advance ensures a successful and interconnected training programme.

Moreover, the interviewees confirmed the knowledge gap identified in the literature review. Participant 4 highlighted a severe shortage of skilled machinists in UK fashion manufacturing, partly due to Brexit impacting the workforce, as many workers were from Eastern Europe. Furthermore, increasing demand for UK-made products necessitates bridging this skills gap. For instance, the social enterprise described by Participant 4 is striving to address this issue:

*“There is a real shortage of skilled machinists in the UK fashion and textiles industry. That’s something that we want to try and change. [...] We think it will also benefit the industry because we are basically able to supply it with people who’ve got the skills, starting to get the experience, but more importantly, are enthusiastic about pursuing a career in the industry. For us now engaging with other manufacturers, we could be a resource. [...] At the same time, we have a shortage of skilled staff to be able to do that. So, hopefully, we will be able to build a bridge to fill that gap in the future”.*

### *Feedback on co-creation workshops*

A series of workshops was conducted in collaboration with the Eastleigh Gurkha Nepalese Association (EGNA), which provides machine sewing and upcycling training to disadvantaged Nepali women in Southampton, UK (Image 4).



*Image 4: Facilitation of a co-creation workshop.*

The lead researcher and first author of this paper facilitated the workshops, providing references to support the creative process, while the participating South Asian women had the freedom to choose their fabrics, colours and designs. These workshops provided a safe space for women to build relationships and gain confidence through learning new skills, like machine sewing and hand embroidery, leading to the co-creation of cushions using surplus fabrics (image 5).



*Image 5: Participants showing their upcycled products at the end of the workshop series.*

The focus group with the participants contributed to validating and finalising the collaborative training framework developed to upskill marginalised South Asian women in the UK and create home decor products. The thematic analysis of the data collected through the focus group revealed that the participants had no prior experience in machine sewing, upcycling cushions or co-creation processes. All the participants expressed the view that the training workshops provided them with new skills and boosted their confidence. They enthusiastically expressed a desire to attend similar workshops in the future, valuing the unique experience of co-creating products. The uplifting training atmosphere received high praise, emphasising the participants' enjoyment and the success of this collaborative training initiative.

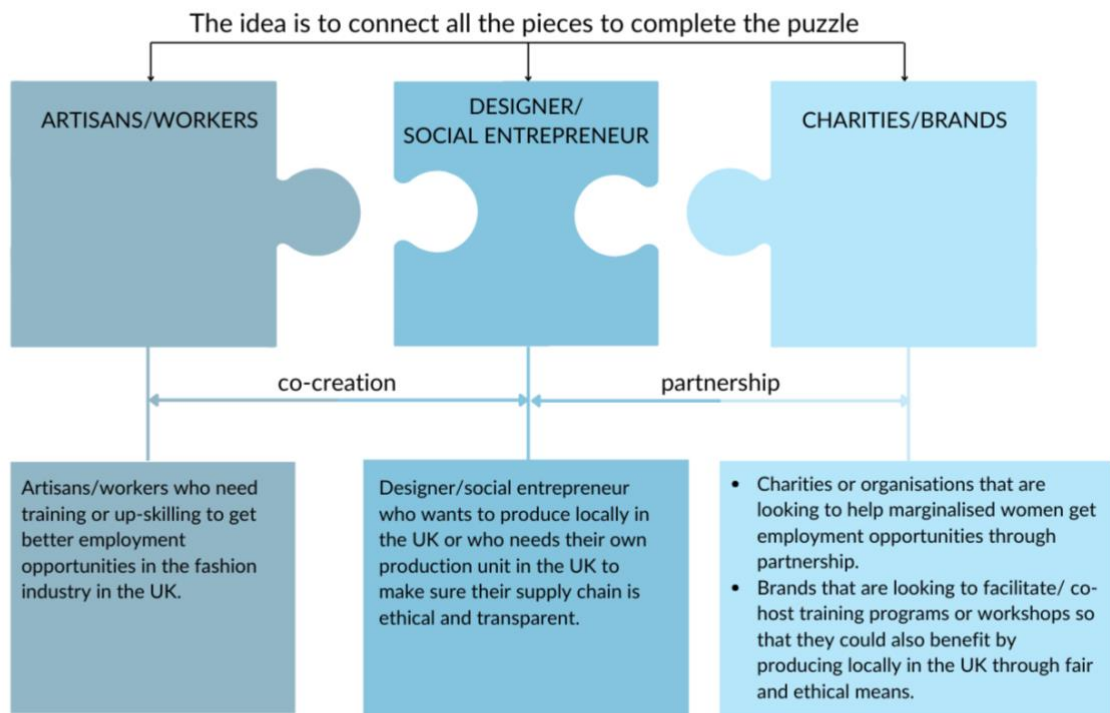
### **Collaborative training framework**

The developed framework addresses the knowledge gap identified through a literature review and confirmed by the industry professionals interviewed for the research presented in this paper. The framework underwent testing through co-creation workshops and refinement via feedback received at a focus group. This collaborative training framework is tailored to a UK-based home decor social enterprise, aiming to train and upskill disadvantaged South Asian women. Additionally, it serves as a valuable guide for other home decor brands or any companies interested in collaborative training for marginalised women in the UK. The framework aims to bridge skills gaps and meet the demand for collaborative training programmes in the country.

Inspired by the concept of jigsaw puzzles, the framework – as illustrated in image 6 – is divided into two phases. The first one represents the three key stakeholders in the fashion industry. In Phase 2, the pieces come together to complete the puzzle, symbolising the resolution of the knowledge gap in this research project.



## BEFORE THE COLLABORATION TRAINING PROGRAMME



## DURING THE COLLABORATION TRAINING PROCESS

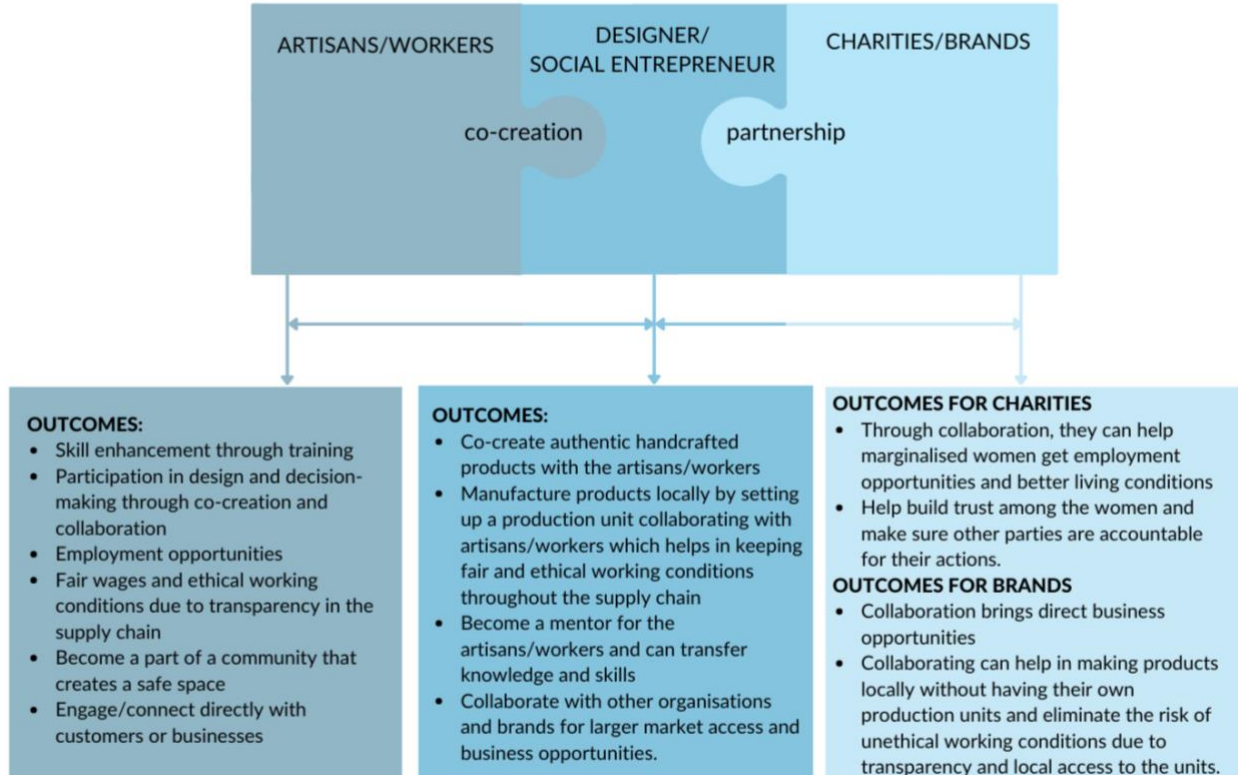


Image 6: Collaborative training framework.



The accompanying guidebook (image 7) offers further details on implementing the framework into practical training programmes and outlines potential developments for Phase 3, which users can adapt to their needs.

# UPCYCLING GUIDEBOOK

## Neha Mathew



### INTRODUCTION

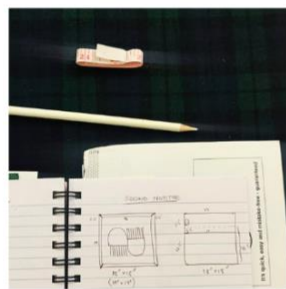
This manual introduces the process of creating a zero-waste cushion cover/pillow cover, using any material. You will create a simple cushion by upcycling unused or surplus fabrics and utilising the material to its fullest. There are no fastenings on the product, such as zippers or buttons. Hand embroidery and patchwork techniques are also used for embellishment.

### FABRIC PREPARATION STEP

Iron your fabrics if wrinkled. For this manual, we are taking the example of a 12" x 12" cushion to guide the steps.

#### STEP 1

Draw a rough sketch to calculate the margins (1 inch) for total height and width needed to make the cushion cover. The total height and width including the margins would be: 14" X 14".



#### STEP 2

Draw the layout onto the fabric using the fabric pencil. Lay the measuring tape flat on your fabric and mark the margins and connect all the four points to look like a square with 1" borders on all sides. This is the front panel of the cushion cover.

There is a slight difference for the measurements for the back panel because it's cut into two parts - one part will become the top flap and the second part will become the bottom panel.

Flap (A) - 6" X 14" with margins  
Bottom panel (B) - 11" X 14" with margins

UPCYCLING MANUAL



#### STEP 3

Cut all the panels and in total, there will be three panels - front, flap (A) and bottom panel(B). These panels could be made from same fabric and different fabrics depending on the availability as the goal is to utilise fabrics and not waste anything.



#### STEP 4

On the good side of front panel which doesn't have any lines marked with the fabric pencil, is where the patchwork and embroidery is going to be done.

Select any small pieces or scraps of fabrics that can be used to make any shape that can be used as the patch. Once the patches are decided, place it on top of the front panel and pin it so that it won't move while doing embroidery.

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### LIST OF THINGS

#### MATERIALS

Any unused fabrics or surplus fabrics. There should be different sizes so that the bigger pieces can be made into the cushion cover and the smaller pieces can be patched on top of it. The fabrics don't have to be same colour, it can be any type.

#### TOOLS

- Fabric Pencils or fabric chalk
- Fabric scissors
- Measuring tape
- Pins
- Ruler
- Embroidery threads and needles

#### MACHINES

- Sewing machine

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### BIO OF THE DESIGNER

Neha Mathew is a London-based textile designer and founder of haav (a zero-waste home decor brand). Her passion is to inspire curiosity and desire within people to make more conscious and ethical choices through haav. haav collaborates with the South Asian women community to uplift and empower them through fair wages and skill enhancement.

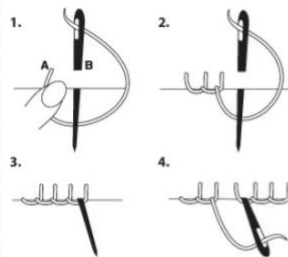


HAAV.DESIGNS



#### STEP 5

Now fold the sides/edges of the patch so that 2cm of the fabric goes under the patch and do blanket stitch embroidery along the sides/edges.



#### STEP 6

This is how it will look once the blanket stitch is done around the edges of the patch.



UPCYCLING MANUAL

#### STEP 7

Have done basic lines of running stitches for embellishment purposes.



#### STEP 8

Now the flap (A) and bottom panel(B) can be individually sewn on one of the width side (14" side). The 1" border can be folded and then stitched to secure the frayed ends. After this pin the two back panels together to make into one square panel.

#### STEP 9

Pin the front and back panels (A+B) together with the good side facing each other so that the traced area can be visible and the two layers of fabrics don't move apart during sewing.

#### STEP 10

Machine stitch all the four edges following the lines marked using the fabrics pencil.

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Image 7: Guidebook.

## Conclusions

This paper discussed a research project which made a theoretical and practical contribution to the field of social innovation and entrepreneurship in the context of the UK fashion industry. The project contributed to the development of an original collaborative framework (Image 6) informed by findings from both primary and secondary research on social entrepreneurship. Another key output of the project is a guidebook detailing the implementation of co-creation workshops as part of a collaborative training programme for upcycling surplus fabrics into home decor products. The guidebook can be adapted and adopted by social entrepreneurs aiming to upskill or train disadvantaged women in the UK. Additionally, the research highlighted challenges and opportunities faced in the UK fashion manufacturing industry and artisan communities and generated information valuable to entrepreneurs and researchers concerned with the need for skilled machinists and collaborative training programmes.

Although the research presented in this paper made a valuable original contribution to knowledge, several limitations were faced throughout the project. Despite efforts to collaborate with various organisations and local councils, specific participants, such as disadvantaged South Asian women, could not be recruited for the co-creation workshop series. Additionally, language barriers were faced during the co-creation workshops with Nepali women, leading to minor communication challenges during the focus group. One significant constraint was the tight timeline, as the project was delivered over three months. Only two cycles of participatory action research were completed instead of the desired three due to time restrictions. Furthermore, the proposed framework could not be fully validated with existing social enterprises, as time limitations prevented further investigations.

These limitations highlight areas for potential future research and improvement of the proposed framework. We acknowledge that the framework is in its early stages and requires additional analysis through testing with other established social enterprises to investigate and gather feedback on how it can support collaborative training with its stakeholders. It is suggested that the developed framework gets adapted, applied and explored further in other contexts to understand how it can help disadvantaged women outside of the UK's South Asian community. Moreover, the guidebook for facilitating a series of co-creation workshops to create upcycled cushions could be extended to diverse product categories and applied in partnerships with organisations other than charities.

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