



STITCHING NEW BEGINNINGS

Meet the woman behind the social enterprise sewing success for marginalised women in London

Written by Michelle Rowley

When Poornima Kirloskar-Saini's beloved mother Kunda Kirloskar died during the COVID-19 pandemic, Poornima sought a way to channel her sorrow into purpose. At the same time, she saw how the pandemic had disproportionately affected ethnic minority women from low-income households. Many of these women had caregiving responsibilities, language barriers, or cultural norms that prevented them from entering the workforce. When their husbands' zero-hour contract roles were suddenly lost, they faced an economic emergency.

"I knew that sewing was a skill that could be done at home, in between other responsibilities," Poornima recalls. "It offered a chance for women to earn money without stepping too far outside their comfort zone." With this vision, the vibrant social enterprise Kundakala ("the art of Kunda") was born. Named in memory of her late mother and the beautiful art she created, Kundakala is far more than a sewing programme. It is a lifeline for women navigating poverty, isolation and systemic barriers. Stitch by stitch, in numerous community centres across London, the sewing lessons are transforming lives by restoring confidence, strengthening communities and laying the foundations for

building sustainable livelihoods. What started as a self-funded project with just seven participants is now a thriving social enterprise, which has touched the lives of over 190 women. Of these, fifteen have gone on to set-up their own micro business and two have secured paid employment with a tailor. "At first, I was approaching women at bus stops to gain interest but now we have waiting lists and have women referred to us from charities and GPs," says Poornima.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE COURSE

Women enrol in an initial six-month entry-level Make and Mend programme, starting with the basics of sewing and progressing to creating their own clothing. After completing the course, everyone receives a sewing machine to support

their continued journey. From here, graduates can go on to join an additional seven-month programme where they are taught to alter garments and products to a professional standard. Expectations are high. "If something isn't right," Poornima insists, "they have to do it again." This rigor prepares the women for real-world markets.

Right Poornima founded Kundakala to help ethnic minority women from low-income households
Below A group of women who have enrolled in the "Make and Mend" entry-level programme

"KUNDALA IS MORE THAN A SEWING PROGRAMME, IT'S A LIFELINE FOR THOSE NAVIGATING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS"





Bottom left Maggie, a 70-year-old former cleaner, joined Kundala and turned her life around. Top left Poornima has already touched the lives of over 190 women since starting Kundala.



Poornima often sells their products at events or partners with businesses for custom orders. Participants receive income from sales and gain paid work experience during their training. "A paying customer is your fiercest critic," says Poornima. "That experience is invaluable." At the end, those who wish to, can join the Kundakala Collective, which helps them launch their own businesses.

BRINGING WOMEN TOGETHER

Operating across the London boroughs of Hackney, Camden, Lambeth and Islington, Poornima's team of dedicated sewing tutors provide the courses free of charge.

Attendees make sustainable, culture-specific clothing, which are often hard to find in mainstream shops, such as bespoke tote bags and purses, dresses, blouses, trousers, scarves, kimonos and sarees. Beyond economic empowerment, the programmes foster deep social and psychological benefits. Many participants are recent migrants or long-term homemakers who feel isolated from broader society. Kundakala offers a safe space in which to meet people from other backgrounds, learn English, and build confidence. One participant, a Somali

"KUNDALA OFFERS A SAFE SPACE IN WHICH TO MEET PEOPLE FROM OTHER BACKGROUNDS"

mother of five, summed it up best: "I used to just drop my kids at school, watch Somali TV, and talk to Somali friends. The program helped me come out and meet other people." Mental health and wellbeing are key outcomes of the initiative and the communal aspect of learning together can be transformative. One Afghani woman went from an isolated stay at home mum of six children all the way to finding the confidence to join a gym.

A SUCCESS STORY

Among the many success stories is Maggie, a 70-year-old former cleaner from Ghana who was being paid below the minimum

wage. Left to raise her children alone, Maggie worked tirelessly, fuelled by her desire to put her children through higher education herself. Poornima saw her meticulous

work ethic and was determined to support Maggie. After participating in the programme, Maggie started making tote bags which Poornima sold for her, in part through a secured restaurant order for branded merchandise. Maggie now works as a paid sewing assistant at Kundakala and her daughter is doing her Master's degree. Another student Mariam, a former dental nurse from Somalia who had to abandon her career after ten years in the profession owing to childcare issues, now specialises in alterations. She has her own clients and



is doing a Level 2 in Fashion and Textiles at New City College (Hackney) to build on what she has learnt at Kundakala. Meanwhile, Jayeda, who lost her confidence and went into depression when she had to close down her retail business in the pandemic, has learnt how to sew and is part of Kundakala's Alteration and Repair services for businesses.

EMBRACING CULTURES

These stories are evidence of what happens when practical skills meet compassionate infrastructure. Learning to sew for these women has brought dignity, autonomy, and hope. Kundakala honours their identities while helping them integrate into a wider economic and cultural landscape.

"We don't try to Westernize anyone," Poornima explains. "You keep your culture, but also gain the skills to engage outside of it." Even

the products themselves reflect this ethos. Take the Saroodie for example, a hoodie-saree hybrid garment trademarked by Poornima. It's a hoodie embellished with borders from vintage sarees. It's a clever blend of comfort, style and sustainability. Customers send in their plain hoodies and Kundakala students add a touch of saree elegance, reviving both garments and traditions. It's also a subtle protest against textile waste. "Each person in the UK throws an average of 35 items of unwanted textiles into general waste every year," says

"IN A SOCIETY DRIVEN BY CONSUMPTION, KUNDALA IS A REMINDER OF SLOWER, MORE MEANINGFUL PRODUCTION"

Above Poornima has been able to employ part-time members of staff to assist her with programme coordination and operations and expanded her team of freelance sewing tutors

Poornima. "We're trying to change that, one Saroodie at a time."

HOW THEY KEEP IT FUNDED

Kundakala runs on a mix of grant funding and in-kind donations. Support has come from institutions like Smallwood City Bridge Trust, Charity Bank's Brighter Futures program, Hackney Council, and the Community Fund Association. But the need remains ongoing. Poornima is currently calling on corporate partners to donate

fabric, fund programmes, and host on-site alteration services – an initiative that not only gives women direct income but brings sustainability to the corporate

wardrobe. "When we go into an office, employees bring in clothes that need mending," she explains. "Our ladies do the work, get paid, and interact directly with clients. It's empowering."

THE CHANGE WE NEED

In a society increasingly driven by convenience and consumption, Kundakala is a reminder of slower, more meaningful production. Every finished garment is proof of transformation, not only of the garment but also of the woman behind it. As the



programme continues to expand its reach and refine its model, it offers a powerful template for how craft can empower and uplift. When the women sew together, they're not just creating garments but also friendships, support groups and change.

Visit kundakala.org to find out more about the programme and how to get involved.



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