

# Can cottage industries bring fashion back to its roots?

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Before factory whistles marked the rhythm of production, it was the quiet hum of spinning wheels and the steady hands of makers that shaped what people wore.

Clothing and textiles were made in homes and villages using labor-intensive techniques like hand-weaving, spinning, natural dyeing and embroidery. Skilled makers often specialized in particular crafts, forming small workshops or working within informal trade networks. In many regions, artisans participated in the "putting-out" system. This was a decentralized form of production where merchants supplied raw materials, and goods were made at home before being collected, finished and sold by traders.

*In Bengal, women stitched kantha quilts from old scraps. In Japan, indigo dyers perfected aizome techniques that turned cloth the color of deep twilight. In Peru, Andean weavers spun intricate stories into their textiles. Across Northern England and the Scottish Highlands, handloom weaving supported entire rural communities...*

As the Industrial Revolution took hold, mechanization replaced handmade production. This shift changed how things were produced. And, regrettably, how they were valued.

## Cottage industries today

Globally, over 61% of the employed population — around 2 billion people — work in the informal sector, with 93% of these workers based in emerging and developing countries, according to a [United Nations](#) study. Within this landscape, cottage industries remain vital to local economies across much of the Global South. These small-scale, often home-based enterprises operate through informal networks built on trust.

“There’s a lot of flexibility and resiliency,” says Mashal Khan of Kaarvan Crafts, a social enterprise that supports women artisans across Pakistan. “Like anyone can start their own karobar [business]. I guess that is one of the biggest positives.”

For many women, these home-based businesses are often the only viable path to financial independence. “These are women who have kids, who have families to take care of,” says Sindhu Holla, founder of Fifth Origins, an artisan-focused lifestyle brand. “Culturally, there is more nuance to take care of than just showing up at a factory.”

Ayesha Adnan, who started a home-based clothing business in Pakistan, agrees. “The benefit is that the children aren’t neglected. They stay right in front of our eyes.” But she’s quick to add that the work doesn’t come easy. “In the beginning, it was very difficult. People were used to shopping in bazaars, so they rarely came to homes. But as my reputation grew, more customers started visiting.”

Stories like Adnan’s are common across Pakistan’s cottage industry, where skills are often passed down informally, generation after generation. Farhana Jabeen, who launched a hoop embroidery business during the COVID-19 pandemic and later expanded into embroidered kurtas, traces her journey back to her grandmother’s needlework. “She used to embroider, and watching her sparked my interest,” Jabeen recalls. “I would sit beside her and learn. That’s how it started. I never had any formal training.”

For others, the path into cottage industry is a response to life’s circumstances. Amina Zahid, a longtime veteran of the sector, explains what often motivates women to begin home-based businesses. “Some are driven by passion, others by financial need, and for many, it becomes a way to support not just themselves, but others too,” she reflects. Zahid herself wasn’t sure what the future held when she first began. “I didn’t know if I’d be able to build a team, find customers... If the work would be consistent, or if it would fade away. Now, 21 years later, I have a team of over 100 artisans. And I’m able to provide them with steady work.”

## **A question of cultural perception**

While cottage industries in the Global South are often heralded as a means of poverty alleviation or women’s empowerment, similar traditions in the Global North are frequently

viewed with nostalgia or dismissed entirely. They're romanticized but rarely taken seriously as active, vital contributors to modern economies.

“Much of the conversation around craft and cultural heritage excludes the U.K.,” says Professor Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas, an award-winning educator and author. “People think of it as something that exists ‘over there’ or ‘back home.’” During the 20th century, especially amid wartime upheaval, much of the UK’s domestic textile tradition was lost. “Some techniques our ancestors used — we simply don’t know how they did it,” she adds.

Even where heritage survives, it is often overlooked. [Harris Tweed](#), for example, remains one of the few crafts still protected by law and tied to its place of origin — the Outer Hebrides — yet few recognize it as part of British cultural heritage.

## Structural challenges

Rapid urbanization has pulled younger generations toward city jobs, disrupting the transfer of artisanal skills from one generation to the next. As a result, the social networks that once supported community-based craft are breaking down. While rural traditions still exist, it’s becoming harder to make a living by staying behind. “In the U.K., we do have rural communities, but... people leave,” notes Radclyffe-Thomas. “They don’t want to stay. Or they might want to stay, but they can’t afford to.”

Climate change adds yet another layer of instability. Shifting weather patterns disrupt the cultivation of raw materials like cotton, leaving artisans with unpredictable supplies and rising costs.

At the same time, traditional aesthetics and techniques are being [co-opted by luxury fashion](#) brands. Handloom weaves, embroidery motifs, indigenous dye processes, beadwork patterns, block printing techniques, and even traditional garment silhouettes are repackaged into 'artisanal' collections that erase the labor and lineage behind them. “Fashion is terrible for picking different designs around the world and exploiting them,” Radclyffe-Thomas warns. “That’s a real danger for anyone working in the craft space — that the fast fashion companies just take their work as inspiration and monetize it in a way that the crafter cannot.”

Vague marketing terms like "heritage," "handcrafted," and "artisan" remain unregulated, often masking cultural appropriation. "Until we have national and global legislation that's strongly enforced, we can't completely prevent it," says Nina Gbor, sustainable fashion educator and researcher. "We can teach consumers to demand proof, to ask brands to show, not just say."

While social media has helped expose greenwashing and cultural theft, Gbor believes the issue is systemic. "Extreme and late-stage capitalism always co-opt ideas and phrases — everything that's good about grassroots, social, humanitarian and other ethical movements — to make themselves look good. It's marketing, and ultimately, it's a strategy for profit growth. Unfortunately, it works too often."

This pattern of cultural extraction is exacerbated by the informal nature of most craft economies. Without contracts or stable buyer relationships, many artisans face volatile cycles of work and underemployment. "Dry spells are tough," says Khan. "After peak sales, women often have to look for alternative income — some becoming swimming instructors or tutors — to keep their households running."

For Khan, the key to empowering artisans lies in visibility and integration, a principle her team at Kaarvan Crafts strives to uphold. "We need structural recognition. Starting with registration. That's how we move them from informal, invisible artists to being part of the national system," she stresses. "Access to finance and digital literacy is equally essential."

## **Tech as a tool**

Technology can become a powerful equalizer in this movement by opening new doors for rural artisans. According to Khan, the pandemic was a turning point: many communities that were previously hesitant began adopting digital tools like Facebook and Instagram to create visual portfolios, while WhatsApp became a key channel for negotiating custom orders.

Khan and her team are now taking it a step further by developing a centralized online platform to amplify the voices of artisans from across Pakistan. "We want it to be sustainable, both for them and for us," she explains, underscoring the long-term vision of the project.

Digital platforms are also helping rural artisans bypass traditional gatekeepers and connect directly with global audiences. Websites and fairs that curate makers' stories are helping them gain visibility and build community. At the same time, Radclyffe-Thomas notes that using these platforms effectively "is another skill set" artisans must now learn.

Holla emphasizes the importance of trust and accountability in these systems. "The biggest challenge artisans face is the authenticity part. How can we authentically say that it's coming from the artisans and that they're being paid well?" Her team is developing a blockchain-based solution that traces paperwork back to the source, ensuring transparency and accountability across the supply chain.

## **Reframing artisan-brand relationships**

The intersection of informal cottage industries with formal fashion systems is fraught with tension. While luxury and ethical brands may collaborate with artisan communities, these partnerships often exist on unequal terms, with power and profit skewed toward the brand.

Some emerging models within the conscious fashion space are challenging this dynamic by reimagining how artisan partnerships are structured. Holla, whose label works directly with small artisan groups, says, "They are not just workers — they are micro-entrepreneurs. We don't even like to call them suppliers because it becomes a very flat relationship. That's not the transaction we want to have with artisans."

These collaborations aim to center artisans not only as skilled producers but also as co-creators. "We do time-in-motion studies to understand how long it takes to make each piece and try to adjust the living wage accordingly," Holla explains. Smaller-scale operations also enable more flexibility and experimentation. "You can do smaller runs, experiment more and work more collaboratively. That just isn't possible in factories. With artisan units, I know there's a lot I can offer them and a lot they can offer me. It becomes a two-way relationship, which I really appreciate — and I think they do too."

One thing is certain: The industry needs to move beyond token gestures and work toward structurally integrating artisans into its mainstream systems. "I'd like to see more big fashion companies investing in the craft they rely on for inspiration... maybe having crafters in residence

or something,” suggests Radclyffe-Thomas. “Where they can come together in a kind of collective, then that really makes sense.”

## Reclaiming the value of craft

Rethinking the future of craft and cottage industries calls for a fundamental shift in how we relate to fashion. “Craft is often a slow process, and people aren’t really used to that with their clothing at the moment, sadly,” reflects Radclyffe-Thomas. In a world driven by convenience and overconsumption, handmade work requires patience and attention that many no longer practice.

Even as interest in small-batch production grows, artisans face a familiar challenge. “Customers should appreciate our work more,” says Adnan. “They’ll praise something they bought from a big brand but won’t show the same regard for what we make.” Jabeen echoes this, observing how shoppers pay without question in stores but often bargain when buying directly from makers.

These patterns speak to deeper, often global, cultural attitudes towards craft. “In the global north, in more advanced capitalist societies, we’ve tended to look down on cottage industry,” says Radclyffe-Thomas. There’s a belief that creative work, especially when it brings joy, shouldn’t need to be compensated fairly.

Changing this mindset requires more than just buying less. “It comes down to intention,” says Khan. “Don’t fall for fast fashion or bargain down someone’s work. Understand the time, skill and care that went into each piece, and honor that.” Gbor agrees, emphasizing the importance of everyday action: “Seek out localized production in your region and buy from them as much as possible. Promote their businesses and even offer to volunteer when they need help, if you’re able.”

In the end, the future of fashion may not look so different from its past: slower, smaller, and rooted in care. When we consider the growing environmental challenges and widening social divides, it becomes clear that revisiting this model of fashion is no longer just an idealistic choice. It’s a necessary one. The question now is whether we can begin to unlearn disposability and remember that clothing was once made to mean something.