



Selyn

Weaving Heritage into Modernity: The Women Weavers Reviving Traditional Handlooms in Sri Lanka

MDF supported Selyn Handlooms to reposition its brand to focus on catering to new markets, including tourism.



The Company

Selyn Handlooms is Sri Lanka's only Fair Trade-guaranteed handloom company. With roots in Kurunegala, Selyn has a history of working closely with the artisan communities producing the traditional handlooms that are characterised by their distinctively vibrant colours. The traditional method of weaving the handloom is a skilled task, requiring the artisan to master the art of the hand-operated loom.

Selyn's business engages significantly with women; the majority of its weavers are women, as are the workers in its factories. Selyn sources from women working from their homes, as well as working in weaving groups.



The Context

A centuries-old industry, the traditional Sri Lankan handloom has retained much of its original form. It is highly labour-intensive, and artisans often work out of their homes or as groups under a 'Master Weaver'. The fabric produced can be used for many things, including bedding and curtain material, sarees, other clothing items, and toys. Although the product is authentically Sri Lankan, it has increasingly become outdated and found it difficult to meet the requirements of a younger, more dynamic consumer segment that includes tourists.



The Challenge

When MDF encountered Selyn, it was established as a well-known company in Sri Lanka, with a reputation for championing the employment and empowerment of women - particularly in its home base of Kurunegala. However, Selyn's product range had not changed significantly since its inception and was not attracting sufficient new customers. While Selyn did have an export portfolio, declining sales were motivating the company to focus on the domestic market (including 'institutional' clients like hotels) and tourists to ensure continued growth.



The Solution

Tourists visiting Sri Lanka are always looking for authentically Sri Lankan products – ranging from souvenirs like devil masks and brass lamps, to clothing that is uniquely Sri Lankan. Selyn's products, with their distinctively Sri Lankan look and feel, perfectly fit this niche. MDF intervened at a crucial point at which Selyn, too, was looking to reinvent itself. MDF supported Selyn to:

- Participate in the New York Trade Fair, which allowed it to position itself in a new, thriving market
- Strengthen its internal processes by hiring a Business Development Consultant to review the entire operation and develop a set of processes that would increase business efficiency
- Re-evaluate its product portfolio by recruiting a Product Development Consultant to assess the existing range and work with the business on developing new products for the target markets.

These interventions culminated in the launch of the 'Sthri' ('woman' in Sinhala/Sanskrit) brand – a newly imagined, ethically sourced clothing line for a new generation of women. New product lines were also developed for children and men. MDF also supported the Sthri launch event.

The Results

192 independent weavers benefitted

  **145** female
47 male

 **LKR20.9 million**
in additional income generated for Selyn and the weaver communities

 **The Sthri range**
An ethically sourced, modern range targeting tourists and new local customers

 **New, more innovative**
ways of thinking and business strategising



Quote from the field

E.M. Seetha Ekanayake, the wife and partner of a Master Weaver running a 20-woman weaving group in Kurunegala, shared:

One of the main problems my husband faced was finding a stable market for the handlooms we were producing. Through Selyn, we found a successful solution for that.

