

cover

ISSUE 74 | SPRING 2024

ÉDITION 1.6.9

SPRING INTO CREATIVITY



SPRING 2024 £5 €8 \$10
cover-magazine.com
Hali Publications Ltd.

WOMEN IN RUG DESIGN • DESIGN DOHA
TURQUOISE MOUNTAIN • JENNIFER MANNERS
CRISTINA CELESTINO • MILAN DESIGN WEEK

Women facilitating change

The lives of Western women in the rug industry have evolved over time. But for male and female weavers in production countries, more change is needed. Lucy Upward hears from two women who are Label STEP's Country Representatives in Pakistan and Nepal



01 Tanveer Jahan leading a Weavers Empowerment Programme meeting in Pakistan

Occupational health and safety: Female carpet workers often face physical strain from long hours of weaving. The programme provides guidance on ergonomics, techniques to reduce strain, and access to resources for physical rehabilitation.

Mental health and psycho-social support: Many female carpet workers experience stress and anxiety due to economic hardships, isolation, and the demands of balancing work with household responsibilities. The programme offers counselling, support groups and workshops.

Financial empowerment: Women are provided with information on market rates, minimum wages, and equipped with the knowledge and skills to negotiate fair compensation for their work.

Prevention of exploitation: Through stakeholder dialogues and female weaver sessions, the programme empowers workers to collectively resist exploitation and negotiate better working conditions and wages.

Child labour prevention: The programme raises awareness among female carpet workers about the negative impacts of child labour and the importance of education.

Empowerment through knowledge: By providing access to information and resources, female carpet workers are enabled to make informed decisions about their finances and well-being.

workers, especially women, are protected and treated fairly in both shed-based and home-based production settings. Label STEP goes beyond audits by providing individual interactions, awareness sessions, seminars, and informational materials to educate women weavers and equip them with negotiation skills, preventing contractors from exploiting them.

What project, undertaking or element of your work are you most proud of in terms of helping women to make informed choices for themselves?

Label STEP has a Weavers Empowerment Programme for both men and women. The women's programme offers numerous benefits.

Awareness and education: The programme educates female carpet workers about their rights, including safe working conditions, fair wages, and protections against discrimination and harassment. Women become empowered to advocate for themselves and demand better treatment from employers.

Tanveer Jahan

As a well-known, dynamic Pakistani human rights defender, Tanveer Jahan has spent thirty-five years in the social development sector. Since 2003 she has been Executive Director at the Democratic Commission for Human Development while her other roles include National Coordinator of the Pakistan Human Rights Defenders Network and head of the affiliated Label STEP operation in Pakistan overseeing weavers' rights.

How do you see your work and the work of Label STEP helping to empower women in your country?

In Pakistan, carpet weaving, while providing a flexible working arrangement that allows women to balance household responsibilities, unfortunately often comes with low wages. Label STEP's work is crucial in this context, particularly through its two main initiatives: compliance audits and the Weavers Empowerment Programme.

The compliance audits ensure that



01

What drives Prasuna Saakha as head of the Label STEP office in Nepal is looking towards a more sustainable handmade rug industry. Pushing the STEP mandate sees her liaising with industry stakeholders, running ambitious development schemes such as the recent Artisan Villages project and auditing the local rug-supply chain with suppliers and manufacturers.

How do you see your work and the work of Label STEP helping to empower women in your country?

Nepal's hand-knotted rug industry continues to be one of the biggest industries, employing over 200,000 artisans across the country. Through its association with its licensees, Label STEP in Nepal is catering to approximately 5,500 industry artisans, most of whom are women. As in most rug-manufacturing countries in South Asia, Nepali women are predominately employed as weavers and artisans in the rug industry. They are at the lowest stratum of the supply chain, with limited voice and agency. Label STEP's main objective is to advocate for weavers'/artisans' welfare and create avenues for weavers to access fair pay, better working conditions, training opportunities and leadership positions.

What project, undertaking or element of your work are you most proud of in terms of helping women to make informed choices for themselves?

Label STEP in cooperation with UKaid Skills for Employment Programme launched the 'Artisan Villages Revitalising Nepal's Carpet Industry', a pilot project to establish artisan villages in rural Nepal. It aims to improve the livelihood and working conditions of current artisans and weavers achieved through skilling programmes, training and certification, with a particular focus on women.

Prasuna Saakha

01 Prasuna Saakha (right) with weavers in Nepal

02 Weavers in Nepal

providing infrastructure, training, and market access, it aims to empower local artisans and preserve traditional carpet-making skills, ensuring the industry's long-term viability.

What do you love most about your job?

Making handmade rugs is a creative industry, and so is our work. We are open to implementing innovative ideas and projects for promotion of fair-trade practices. We



02

Throughout its history, Kathmandu has served as the creative hub for the handmade carpet industry, employing over 100,000 weavers and workers from all over Nepal. The 'Artisan Villages' project aims at decentralising production away from the capital city, and re-localising to rural areas with surplus labour, thus tapping into the unused potential of a workforce composed mainly of women and disadvantaged adults. Through creating a safe, reliable network of local jobs for weavers in rural areas, the project strives to bring weaving to the communities they call home. By establishing artisan and weaving facilities,

are passionate about collaborating with the industry stakeholders to co-create new projects to help the global and local rug industry thrive and sustain.

We have the necessary networks and connections with major stakeholders in the supply chain of the rug industry. We are best placed to influence and collaborate to uphold fair trade practices. Empowering marginalised women and communities through skill training, livelihood creation and fair-trade practices is at the centre of our work. We focus on impacts and results, and this makes our work fun and rewarding.

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