

# Upcycled saris empower women in north

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By Fathima Riznaz Hafi

Sari Connection is a novel project launched by Japanese NGO, PARCIC (Pacific Asia Resource Center Interpeople's Cooperation) in 2012 with the aim to empower women-headed families in the North, who have been affected by the tsunami and war. Used saris that have been donated by other women in the country are sent to the North, upcycled into chic modern dresses and then sold to the high-end market.

This sequence aids families that are financially unstable to gain some constancy in income with the convenience of working from home. At the same time the upcycling plays a big part in sustaining the environment.

The Weekend FT spoke to PARCIC Project Coordinator Fumi Ito who explained the aims of Sari Connection, giving a clear idea of how they operate and also mentioning what the public can do to help them. During the chat I was occasionally distracted by the line of vibrant, creatively designed clothes hung in a row that could be seen behind Fumi who was wearing a striking dark blue dress – an upcycled product of Sari Connection. Besides dresses, their collection consists of blouses, beachwear, skirts, pants, bags, cushion covers, table runners and hair bands.

“Initially starting our work in 2004, we had been mainly supporting fishing communities in Jaffna and Mullaitivu who were affected by the tsunami as well as the war, to help them start their lives again, assisting with their livelihood in areas like fishing activities, getting fishing gear and training them to make dry fish and dry prawns,” she said.

“While working with the fishermen communities we found that if the fish catch is not enough, they don't earn much money; therefore sometimes their income is not stable. When they depend only on this work they suffer from financial difficulties – especially women who are breadwinners of their households. We were thinking of a way to create an income source that is more stable.

“At the same time, when our staff from Tokyo came, they found that most of the rich people in Sri Lanka have saris which are not worn anymore; they buy saris for occasions but after wearing them two or three times they just keep them in their homes. Recycling is quite popular in Japan and we thought maybe we can do something with those saris that are not worn anymore. Since we were looking for ways to help the women in the fisherman communities, we just combined the two ideas and that's how we started this project.”

They now collect used saris, send them to the North for the ladies to sew, pay them and then sell it for them. This way they are not depending on the fishing activity alone and this work can give them a small amount of stable income. The project started with 30 women working with them in 2012 and now there are 70 women, from Jaffna and Mullaitivu – six villages in these two areas.

The women don't have to wait for the products to be sold in order to receive the money. “When they complete the products we pay them and then the stock becomes ours and is our responsibility to sell. Whether we manage to sell the items or not does not affect the women. Our team in Colombo takes care of the selling and marketing part. We spoke to Laksala, Lakpahana and Barefoot – these shops are now selling our items.”

Fumi adds that their products are most popular with the tourists and the Colombo high-end crowd. Sometimes they have difficulty selling to the locals because they don't want to buy used saris but many foreigners like this because they like the concept and that they are re-using the saris, saying 'you do justice'!

### Sari donation

Now they are asking for support from people all over the country – they send letters to schools or companies, post articles in newspapers and they also ask some sari shops in Colombo to place a box allocated for used-sari donation.

It's been four years since they started and so far they have collected up to 4,000 saris. It's not just from Colombo; there are women's associations in other areas as well and they collect saris as a group and sometimes a group can collect up to 300 or 400 saris; and big companies like Singer, John Keells and HSBC also help by collecting saris from their staff. Citi Bank gave them an opportunity to make a small presentation on International Women's Day where a woman from Jaffna explained their project.

### Equipment and training

JAICA has been funding the equipment and material needed for sewing from the start. A local teacher in Jaffna visits them daily and checks the quality. A teacher was arranged to train the women who didn't have any idea how to sew – she taught them how to sew from the beginning. Some of the women already knew how to stitch and wanted to use those skills but didn't have a way to use them – those people are really happy with what's been done. They've also started making bags out of patchwork; a woman from Colombo who specialises in handcraft was invited to teach the women how to do this work.

"The ladies work from their homes but once a week we visit them at their villages and check the quality. Ideas for designs come from various people. In the beginning some of our Japanese teachers gave patterns and blocks; the table runner idea was given by the lady who teaches patchwork and the lady who teaches sewing is actually a tailor so if she sees a picture she can make a block out of that," Fumi said.

### How to help

Sari Connection is looking for people who can give them ideas for new patterns because the same ones have been used for four years. Blocks would be greatly appreciated as well.

They are also looking for places where they can supply these items; anybody who is interested in buying and selling their products can contact them.

More saris are welcome and as long as it is in Colombo and suburbs they will come to your doorstep and collect them. Alternately the goods can be dropped off at their centre. They can be reached via Facebook, email or phone.

Pix by Shehan Gunasekara