

सुई की नज़र से

through
the
needle's
eye

MRINALINI SINGH
& SARAH NATHANI



To Ms. Anju Negi and Ms. Madhu Sood.

For your warmth, patience and support.

*Thank you for giving us a glimpse of the sheer love
and resilience Rupaab emanates. Your insights have
been invaluable. Your commitment to empowering
women continues to inspire us.*

THE INDIAN TEXTILE INDUSTRY

is integral to national economic growth and international supply chains. According to the Indian Ministry of Textiles, today, it is:

- India's second-largest employer, after agriculture, employing over 45 million people, many in informal or semi-formal settings
- Contributing 2% to India's gross domestic product
- Valued at \$175.7 billion, making up 8.21% of total exports in 2023–24
- Exporting mainly to the United States of America and the European Union, with about a 47% share in total textile and apparel exports.

Behind these impressive numbers, however, lies a system of labour practices:

- In India's textile sector, workers are often paid by output rather than an hourly wage. The idea of piece-wage labour intensifies exploitation. As Karl Marx observes in 'Capital', "Given piece-wage, it is naturally the personal interest of the labourer to strain his labour-power as intensely as possible; this enables the capitalist to raise more easily the normal degree of intensity of labour. It is moreover now the personal interest of the labourer to lengthen the working-day, since with it his daily or weekly wages rise". This dynamic pressures workers to work longer hours.
- India's small-scale production model in the industry calls for them to retain a flexible structure rooted in generalist skills. This structure sustains the figure of a generally male "master tailor" as a skilled artisan. It often comes at the expense of labour protections and job regularity, particularly for women, whose work becomes trivialised and almost invisible than that of the male "master tailor"



Women comprise the majority of the informal labor force, and yet, they remain disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid and most precarious positions. In factories, they endure long hours for minimal wages. Gendered power imbalances entrench the exploitation of home-based female workers. Subcontractors, who are often male, typically resort to verbal abuse or intimidation to impose compliance. For home-based women workers, these conditions are exacerbated by a lack of regulation surrounding the conditions of their work.

Regionally, the garment industry is highly feminised in South India, particularly Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, which house the largest concentration of female garment workers. Delhi and Noida are major hubs of the garment industry, although they are less feminised. These regions have home-based garment work being common.

In 2016, according to a report by the International Labour Organisation, the gender pay gap in India's garment sector stood at 34.6%, which reflects a systemic undervaluing of women's labor. A 2019 study of 342 home-based garment workers in New Delhi found that female workers earned just ₹78 a day on average. This translates to \$0.12/hour at 2025 rates, and these earnings fall 60–80% below minimum wage.

It also revealed the appalling results that three out of four workers in Delhi began home-based garment work due to financial pressure, and more than 40% entered the industry as children.

These conditions are deeply unsustainable, and yet many women have no choice but to continue working in them.



artisan: a worker who practices a skilled trade, usually using traditional methods & locally sourced materials to produce culturally significant goods

WOMEN "WORKERS"



The Self-Employed Women's Association is India's largest Central Trade Union for women in the informal economy. It focuses on the voice, visibility, and validity for women workers. Founded in 1972 by Ela Bhatt in Ahmedabad, it originated from Women's Wing of Textile Labour Association, which was founded in 1920 by Anasuya Sarabhai & Mahatma Gandhi.

2013

- 1,200 women linked
- 750 poor women shareholders
- 420 women members directly supported
- Total production worth ₹57,49,389 / \$67,979

Ruaab is a women-owned, artisan-run producer company rooted in ethical practices and grassroots empowerment. With three active centres in Delhi—New Ashok Nagar (hand embroidery), Nand Nagri (crochet), and Sunder Nagri (adda work)—and a weaving unit in Bihar supporting 10 silk weavers for 'Fabindia', Ruaab currently engages around 80 women artisans. The organisation is democratically run by a board of artisan shareholders, allowing for collaborative decision-making and peer-led recruitment, especially when large orders arrive.

In Ruaab, artisans have the freedom to work according to their personal schedules. A typical workday is fluid, often beginning mid-morning, with artisans juggling childcare and household responsibilities before and after their stitching hours. Many take work home, blending domestic life with their craft.

Ruaab emphasises solidarity and collective empowerment through regular upskilling sessions, capacity-building workshops, and leadership training facilitated by SEWA. Most artisans live within the same communities, allowing them to relate deeply to one another's struggles and build bonds rooted in shared experience. Regular check-ins and mentorship mechanisms ensure that women are also holistically, through assistance with Aadhaar enrollment, financial literacy, and access to banking services via "SEWA Shakti Kendras".

Their embroidery practices are steeped in tradition but are also remarkably versatile. Ruaab works with a wide range of techniques: from hand embroidery and adda work to contemporary fabric-based applications on cotton, silk, velvet, and semi-pashmina. The Bihar unit produces Bhagalpur silk and eri mulberry saris. Materials are often chosen based on buyer budgets, but Ruaab has begun experimenting with sustainable options like banana silk soles, vegetable dyes, and organic block prints—often showcased in exhibitions.

To maintain quality and ethics while working with big brands, Ruaab uses a meticulous supply chain process. Merchandisers and centre-in-charges supervise every project. A sample piece is first created, the time is tracked, and then costs are calculated based on hourly wages. Once the buyer approves the sample, Ruaab scales production to 100–200 pieces per day. Importantly, production quantities are adjusted according to each artisan's pace: some may make five pieces a day, others ten, ensuring no one is overburdened. Quality checks are frequent and rigorous. Artisans are compensated sometimes on hourly basis and others, paid by piece produced.

Ruaab has carved a niche in both B2B collaborations and small-scale B2C exhibitions. While most of their work involves embroidery-only job work for export houses like Zara and Primark (with finishing done by clients), they've also ventured into crafting utility bags, laptop sleeves, bookmarks, belts, and other accessories.

To remain relevant, Ruaab stays attuned to current fashion, taking their center leads to malls for trendspotting and incorporating those learnings into their designs.

Despite their traditional focus, Ruaab artisans are open to exploring contemporary styles and silhouettes. While their comfort zone lies in saris, scarves, kaftans, and traditional accessories like potlis and parandis, there is interest in learning about co-ords, structured jackets, and even denim, though this would require access to different machines and washing units. They've previously selected colours and motifs for collections, though their awareness of "market sensibilities" is still growing.



From Ruaab's perspective, a meaningful collaboration with fashion houses or brands is one where artisans aren't just behind-the-scenes workers, but are celebrated as creators. They welcome partnerships where designers offer operational direction while ensuring Ruaab and its women are acknowledged and visible. Looking ahead, Ruaab aspires to grow into a brand with the stature of Fabindia—scaling ethically, meeting annual targets, and expanding its creative reach while staying rooted in its mission of empowering women through skill, dignity, and solidarity.

2024

- Over 75 artisans saw their income increase by 76% after just one year
- 20% of artisans have gained new skills through Ruaab training programs, including business and crafting techniques
- Ruaab products are now available in Spain and many states in India
- In 2024, Ruaab saw a 20% increase in profit
- FY 2024-25 depicts a 5% improvement in B2B performance due to corporate orders whilst B2C sales increased by 114%





The invisibility of women's labour in the global garment supply chain is not incidental, but structural. Collectives like Ruaab demonstrate that garment production can centre dignity, collaboration, and autonomy without sacrificing quality. Stakeholders further up the supply chain, as well as consumers, must actively choose to step away from exploitative work and shift practices to support workers in the garment industry.

ROLE OF DESIGNERS

- Engage with artisans as creative collaborators, not merely as producers executing pre-determined designs
- Resist the pressures of fast fashion, and in turn, mitigate the exploitative conditions that are needed to meet these demands
- Help champion stories of labour and art behind garments in their own branding and marketing

ROLE OF CONSUMERS

- Support fashion practices that prioritise longevity, quality, and ethical sourcing
- Questioning pricing structures that offer garments at unrealistically low costs, which obscure the labour exploitation behind them
- Demand transparency in how garments are produced, where materials come from, and how labour, particularly women's labor, is treated in the process

WHY CALI?



Only 2% of clothing sold in the United States is made domestically. The vast majority are imported from countries such as India, China, Vietnam, and Bangladesh,

In 2024, Governor Gavin Newsom of California signed a bill that takes a step towards sustainability practices in the fashion industry. SB 707 is a law that requires textile and apparel companies to take back items such as garments and textiles, with the purpose of reusing or recycling them. This legislation reflects a broader commitment to accountability in fashion practices.

California, then, is positioned to support a transition to reimagined supply chain models that don't negate the rights of women workers. As a major fashion hub, California's consumption patterns shape global trends. The choices made here, in terms of consumption and production, have the power to influence the garment industry worldwide. Recognising the gendered nature of the fashion industry in the Global South, where so many of the clothes we wear come from.

2025 Ruaab has seen a 45% increase in sales



In celebrating Ruaab, you aren't merely lifting a brand—you're amplifying a movement. One where fashion is not fleeting, but grounding. Where every string tells a story. Where women hold the pen.



The global garment supply chain is, above everything else, a web of human stories. Ruaab reminded us that fashion can be made with care, creativity, and justice at its core.

As consumers, we have the power to demand that the industry turn away from exploitation, standing in solidarity with women garment workers.

The future of fashion is not only in what we wear, but in how we choose to see and stand with the hands that make it.

For Mrinalini and Sarah, this has been more than just a publication—it is an invitation. To see, to feel, and to wear fashion that honours the lives behind the loom.

