

## Visible Threads: CSR Programme : Skills training and social support for garment workers in the fashion industry

Brisbane, Australia Cambodia  
Lauren Solomon

**Threads.** A Corporate Social Responsibility Programme for the garment industry | An extraordinary collaboration between brands, NGOs, universities, factories and garment workers | Creating positive intervention in the global supply chain

Year Founded:  
2015

**Organization type:**

hybrid

Project Stage:

Idea

**Budget:**

\$10,000 - \$50,000

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- [Ethics](#)

### Project Summary

#### Elevator Pitch

**Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.**

Collaborating with cross sector stakeholders, a new CSR programme will be delivered to address both industry tensions and social issues faced by female garment workers in Cambodia. At the end of the programme the worker will have increased their skills, capacity, confidence and general well-being.

**WHAT IF - Inspiration: Write one sentence that describes a way that your project dares to ask, "WHAT IF?"**

What if fashion brands, factories, NGOs, universities and garment workers could collaborate to deliver a new CSR programme which had a positive impact on garment workers in the supply chain?

#### About Project

**Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?**

Many brands use Cambodia as a key site for fashion production, including: H&M, Zara, C&A, Nike and Levi's. With minimal industry skills, workers are only capable of producing basic products, consequently there is pressure to reach high production targets at low costs, causing tension between brands, factories and workers. Workers are mainly young, uneducated women. Social issues include: nutrition, health, unsafe transport and working conditions.

**Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!**

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) will develop and deliver a holistic CSR programme which will address both industry tension and social issues faced by female garment workers in Cambodia. This project has two strands, training development and social support. 1. Training Development - Workshops and resources will address industry tensions (including skills and capacity development) focusing on technical skills development, critical thinking and communication. This will up-skill the current workforce, increase worker capacity and individual agency. 2. Social Support - Collaborating with NGOs, social support tools which address social issues (for example nutrition and health) will be provided for garment workers in the programme.

**Awards**

Solomon is a recipient of the APA Postgraduate Scholarship (Australian Government)

### Impact: How does it Work

**Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.**

This programme will run for 6-10 weeks, with workers participating in workshops 5 days a week for 2 hour blocks (breakfast or lunch). Workshops will focus on technical skills (whole garment construction which extends beyond existing capacity of piece construction), critical thinking (design exercises which teach research and problem solving skills) and communication (language skills specific to the garment industry). Along side the training, a food programme, safe transport and some healthcare assistance (possible collaboration with Population Council – reproductive health) will be available to the workers. At the end of the programme a garment worker will have increased their skills, capacity, confidence and their general well-being.

**Impact: What is the impact of the work to date? Also describe the projected future impact for the coming years.**

Despite the adoption of CSR in Cambodia (for example: codes of conduct and factory audits by Better Factories Cambodia), Doctoral research conducted in Cambodia by Solomon (2015), revealed that workers face industry and social issues, whilst industrial relations scandals (violent strikes) occur daily. This research is supported by Human Rights Watch 2015 report Work Faster or Get Out, the media (VICE, The True Cost) and press locally (Phnom Penh Post) and Internationally (The Guardian). Whilst there is clear recognition that there are problems, there is no solution to how workers, factories, NGOs and brands may work together to improve practices. The Visible Threads Programme addresses this gap by engaging directly with workers to improve their lives, reduce industry tensions and also change CSR mentality, so that it has real impact on the workers hidden in the supply chain.

**Spread Strategies: Moving forward, what are the main strategies for scaling impact?**

To start, this programme will be tested as a pilot in 2016, to garment workers in one Cambodian factory. Demonstrating the benefits of increasing skills and wellbeing of workers, (examples include: increase in productivity, decrease in industry tensions), this programme will be expanded in Cambodia (2017 – 10 factories and 2018-2020 – 50 factories). Using a flexible and adaptable model, this programme can be applied to all factories in Cambodia (aiming for completion by 2026 – 600 factories) and to other developing countries that mass-produce fashion.

**Sustainability**

**Financial Sustainability Plan: What is this solution’s plan to ensure financial sustainability?**

As this project is a collaboration, it will utilise resources and financing from multiple sectors. This will include grants, leveraging training development skills from universities and financial contributions from the brands involved, as a way to take increased responsibility for the workers in their supply chains. After the piloting phase, investors will be brought together to further strengthen the financial sustainability of the programme.

**Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?**

Brands have implemented CSR mechanisms, however the real change this has for Cambodian workers remains questionable. Interviews with garment workers and unions revealed that workers had no idea audits were taking place and were unaware of what brand they produce for. Illustrating a disconnect between corporate mandates and on the ground activity. By incentivising collaboration between stakeholders to achieve shared outcomes (productivity, reduced industry tensions, less social issues), this project goes beyond the usual framework of corporate CSR strategies, encouraging shared accountability.

**Team**

**Founding Story**

Working in the fashion industry, Solomon questioned hidden supply chain practices. Investigating concepts of fairer trade, Solomon was involved in social initiatives, working with communities in developing countries. These initiatives had impact on individuals involved, however questions remained as to how this model could be applied in the global industry, with endemic exploitation and customers demanding a high turnover of cheap products. Solomon commenced Doctoral research, investigating sites of production, Cambodia presented challenges but also a space for intervention, whereby a new CSR programme could have positive impact on the workers whilst meeting shared objectives of stakeholders

**Team**

Lauren Solomon Position & Organisation: Doctorate of Creative Industries Candidate, Sessional Fashion Tutor, Faculty of Creative Industries, QUT  
Project Role: Project Manager & Principal Investigator. Kathleen Horton Position & Organisation: Head of Discipline, Fashion, Faculty of Creative Industries, QUT, Australia. Director of Not-for-profit organisation, The Stitchery Collective, Australia. Project Role: Academic Advisor (Training Development). Dr Tiziana Ferrero-Regis Position & Organisation: Senior Lecturer, Fashion, Faculty of Creative Industries, QUT, Australia. Project Role: Academic Advisor (Training Development). Kaira Bulley Position & Organisation: Fashion Technician, Faculty of Creative Industries, QUT, Australia. Project Role: Technical Advisor & Workshop Facilitator (Training Development). Nicky Ward Position & Organisation: Grants Manager, Cambodian Children’s Fund, Cambodia. Project Role: Industry Mentor (for Solomon), Social Advisor (Social Support). Anneleise Helmy Position & Organisation: Lecturer, Raffles International College. Director - Fairsew, Cambodia. Project Role: Local Education Advisor (Training Development) (TBC). Dr Julie King Position & Organisation: Coordinator International Engagement, Social Work and Human Services, QUT, Australia. Although King works in Australia she has extensive experience running development projects in Cambodia. Project Role: Academic Advisor (Social Support) (TBC).

**Value Chain: Where does your work fit into the apparel value chain? [check all that apply]**

Manufacturing.

**Your Role: What is your relationship to the apparel industry? [check all that apply]**

Consumer, Researcher, Other [please specify].

**Target Population: What stakeholder groups do you engage or empower in your work? [check all that apply]**

Brands, Corporations, Factory Workers, Factory Owners, Researchers, Supplier - contractor, Women.

**● Intervention Focus: What are you trying to achieve / influence? [check all that apply]**

Access to Essential Services (i.e. Healthcare and Education), Accountability, Gender Equality, Physical Working Conditions, Transparency.

**Lever for Change: Select up to 3 ways your work is helping to transform the industry.**

Capacity Building, Standards, Training.

**Is your project targeted at solving any of the following key barriers?**

Hidden from View: Conditions in Forests, Farms, and Factories are Only Visible to a Select Few, A Job is Not Enough: Low-Income Workers Cannot Secure Long-Term Well-Being.

**Does your project utilize any of the innovative design principles below?**

Activate Local Know-how for Driving Solutions: Build Opportunities for Workers to Become Leaders, Transform the Chain into a Web: Link Unlikely Sectors that Open New Pathways to Sustainability.

**Innovation Inspiration: When you first conceived of your project, did you think of it as applicable to the apparel industry?**

yes

**If you answered "no" to the previous question, which industry was your project originally aimed at transforming?**

● **Replicating in the Apparel Industry: If your project didn't initially target the apparel industry, how are you specifically tailoring it to do so now?**

**Are you nurturing or inspiring others to be changemakers? If so, how?**

Yes, this project will inspire stakeholders to collaborate in order to create positive changes in the supply chain

● **Tell us about the partnerships that enhance your approach. How have you collaborated with others in the industry to increase your impact?**

Collaborating (brands, NGOs, universities, factories, garment workers) will encourage shared accountability, increasing impact.

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