

HANDICRAFT
in Maldives

Blank Page

HANDICRAFT *in Maldives*

Enterprise Development Unit
©2007 Ministry of Economic Development and Trade
Ministry of Economic Development and Trade

Published by;
Ministry of Economic Development and Trade
Ghazee Building
Male'
Republic of Maldives
e-mail; contact@trademin.gov.mv
website: www.trademin.gov.mv

Compiled and edited by:
Mohamed Luveiz

Written by:
Ahmed Zakariyya, Mariyam Nisha, Aishath Rasha

Proof read by:
Hassan Nizam

Cover Design and Layout :
Abdulla Ziyath

Photography:
Abdulla Ziyath, Mohamed Nizal

Blank Page

Acknowledgment

The Authors are grateful for the cooperation and sharing of knowledge extended by all those consulted.

Special thanks to:

Ahmed Shafeeg for his invaluable contribution made to the handicraft and cottage industry through his work on *Dhivehi Masakaitherikan*.

David Holbourne; Handicrafts and cottage industry of Maldives. 1990.

Blank Page

Contents

Introduction	1
Research Findings - Handicraft in Maldives	3
A look into a few crafts belonging to the rich heritage of the Maldives	5
Marketing channels	17
Employment patterns and availability of skilled craftsmen and women	19
Issues Facing the Handicraft Industry in the Maldives	20
Potential of the Handicraft industry	21
National Handicraft Center	22
The branding initiative - Authentic Maldivian Products	23

Introduction



In the past Maldivian craftsmanship had a regional reputation of excellence reaching as far as the Arab nations. However, with the quick progress of industrialization followed by the opening of markets in the Maldives seeing a significant influx of cheap, foreign-produced handicrafts, the sector has fallen into obscurity. As studies have shown, some of the major reasons for this development involve comparative disadvantages of the Maldives (high transportation costs, fragmented geography of an island state, scarcity of raw materials, limited workforce), explosive growth of the tourism sector and the related construction industry, which has absorbed all craftsmen available in the market, and availability of cheap, imported handicraft products in the Maldives produced in other Asian countries with comparative and competitive advantages.

Traditionally handicraft in the Maldives include mat weaving, embroidery (kasabu boavalhu libaas), coir making and lacquer work. It is believed that each of these skills are confined to certain geographical regions, atolls or islands.

The island of Gadhdhoo in Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll for instance is renowned for its fine hand-woven mats made of dried hau (rushes) used for prayer mats and as a decoration. The finest lacquer work is said to be found on Thulaadhoo, in Baa Atoll. Wooden pots, boxes and vases of all shapes and sizes display beautiful abstract patterns in red, black and yellow. Rin'budhoo in Dhaalu Atoll is famous for its goldsmiths while Hulhudeli in the same Atoll is well known for its silversmiths.

However with certain initiatives engineered by private sector individuals there have been a number of changes in the production aspects of these products. More and more, shop owners are outsourcing the production of crafts to nearby islands where their costs are lower. Others simply buy products which resemble the Asian culture and exhibit them in their outlets for which there is a high demand from unsuspecting tourists as well as those who do not care as long as the product is of an exotic nature. Consequently we find that local handicrafts are being replaced by the influx of cheap imports from abroad, and hitting local producers who are less competitive in the market.

The research encompassed in the compilation of the book involves both primary and secondary data collection which was exercised by a 6 personnel team from the Enterprise Development Unit of Ministry of Economic Development and Trade. To this effect out of the 200 inhabited islands in the Maldives, 90% of the island offices were interviewed. The main source of information was through telephone

interviews with Island Chiefs. Furthermore, three retailers of handicrafts in Male' were interviewed. The official report of the Industrial Exhibition of 1996 was also reviewed.



Research findings

Handicraft in Maldives

According to literature review done in documents such as official report of the Maldives Industrial Exhibition organized by the then Ministry of Trade and Industries, the categories of handicraft items produced in the Maldives fall into the following categories.

1. Lacquer work
2. Wood carving
3. Stone carving
4. *Dhigu haru liyun* - Specialised form of wood carving
5. Mat weaving
 - *Fangi viyun*
 - *Thun'du kunaa viyun*
 - *Aadhaige kunaa viyun*
 - *Saanthi viyun*
6. *Roanuveshun* - Coir rope work including floor mats.
8. *Feyraanviyun* - Textile production
9. *Gahanaa hedhun* - Jewelry work Including work of shell, pearls
10. *Naasheege masaiykaiy* - crafting of souvenirs such as necklaces, vases, dhoni from coconut shells
11. Embroidery work
12. Fabric Painting
13. Other forms of weaving
 - Rukufanun thakethi ufedhdhun
 - Rukufanthi work
15. Ilosheege masaiykaiy - eekle work
16. Blacksmith, Goldsmith and silvermiths
17. Crafting dhoani
18. household utensils including spoons, fork, stirrer, lid and cutting mat.





List of individual crafts produced in the atolls

A survey of the atolls on individual products crafted in the atolls, generated through telephone interviews with Island Chiefs in the atolls revealed that the amount of craft items currently produced have significantly reduced to 40 items which are presented below.

1. Fangi
2. Kunaan (aadhaige)
3. Thun'du kunaan
4. Saanthi
5. Sataa
6. Floor mat
7. Mulhoashi
8. Pot
9. Goshi
10. Halani
11. Baiypolhi
12. Feyli
13. Vashi
14. Coir rope
15. Libaahu hiru
16. Pillow
17. Lacquer products
18. Fabric paints
19. Local broom
20. Raabadhi
21. Masgon'di
22. Kudhi dhoni
23. Traditional eekle broom
24. Foiy gon'di
25. Coconut scraper (Hunigondi and Thagari)
26. Ulaa, Samusaa aai un'dhulhi
27. Diyahikkaa fai
28. Foah valhi
29. Valhi, Kathivalhi, Furoa, Odaa
30. Anchor
31. Fanaa
32. Shell necklace
33. Traditional iron (aluminum)
34. Jewelry from pearland shell
35. Traditional hook
36. Jewelry from coconut shell
37. Malaafaiy
38. Masdhan'di
39. Gonu
40. Dhaani un'bu

A look into a few crafts belonging to the rich heritage of the Maldives

Laa jehun (Lacquer work)

Lacquer work that is locally known as “Laa jehun”, is made from a combination of the juice of trees. It has been known that lacquer was first produced, and used for production by the Chinese. Lacquer has been used by man in days prior to the birth of Jesus, for special occasions in their everyday lives.

Uses of Lacquer

Maldivians have been using Lacquer work almost always in the production of handicraft. It has been used by Maldivians so long that it is almost impossible to pin point that time in history when it began. Lacquer work has always been an imported product in the Maldives.

This craft work has come to the Maldives from China, Japan and other Asian countries that the Maldives had business connections with in the past.

From a long time ago, Lacquer work has been used to decorate the interior of buildings, and to display the artistry of local craftsmen. In this regard, Lacquer work is used on mostly wood as a coating to prevent it from the weather and to maintain quality of wood for long periods of time. Listed below are some objects in which lacquer work is done.

- Wood and metallic objects
- Skin and bone of animals, birds and fish
- Egg shells
- Paper products
- Glass
- Mud products

Among Maldivians, the art of Lacquer work has been divided in to three main parts. They are, lacquer preparation, lacquer application. The lacquer has to be specially prepared for the latter two, and it is called *laa thelhun* (beating)

Lacquer preparation

The lacquer is drawn and beaten in two ways. One way is to heat the required amount of lacquer in the fire, take it out and put it on a piece of wood when it melted and to smash it into small pieces with a wooden baton before the hot lacquer cools down. In this process, the lacquer will keep on melting from the heat.

When the lacquer can be stretched like a thread, then colour is added (if required) and the lacquer is continually smashed so that the color gets through to all parts of the lacquer.

The other method of preparing the lacquer is to take a small piece of lacquer in the hand and to heat it in the fire. When it starts to melt, more lacquer is added to the melting lacquer and is molded in to a shape by the hand. Colour can be added if required during this process. When the colour has been added, then the lacquer can be sliced according to the shape and size required. (Thickness=1/8 inch, width=1/2 inch, length=3-4inch)

The lacquer that is imported into the Maldives is divided into two types by the Maldivian craftsmen. They are powdered lacquer (locally called "kundi laa") and lacquer bar (locally called "Fothi Laa" from which lacquer bar is used mostly for the purpose of making handicraft items.



Colouring

Maldivian craftsmen have yet not defined the exact proportion of colours to be mixed when colouring the lacquer. In the old days, three colours were always used to colour the lacquer. For a lighter colour, yellow was used, and for a darker colour, black was used. A Maldivian herbal medicine in the name of *Fashurisseu* was used to bring out the light colours.

A substance called *Uguli* was used to make red colour. The (lightness-darkness) of the colour depends on how much *uguli* is used and *fashurisseu* can be used to make the colour lighter.

Black colour is brought by lighting an oil lantern to a piece of ceramic tile and collecting the black tar (remains of smoke) collected on the tile. The most prominent colour used in the coloring of lacquer is the black colour. However, in more recent days, ready-made colour is used to design the lacquer instead of making the colour by scratch. From these ready-made colours, oil colour is known to be better than other types. Gold and silver dust is also used to make the lacquer design look more beautiful.

Laa fenkurun

This is the term used to describe the process of *faalees kurun* (polished finishing of wood work etc). This has been done from a long time ago to maintain quality of work done on wood, and a great amount of care is given to this process.

According to late Ahmed Didi of Addu Atoll Meedhu, laa fenkurun is the process by which, lacquer is cooked in water along with a substance called *rankaru*. This broth is left to boil till all the water evaporates, and the remaining mixture is left in the sun for three days and then this water mixture is poured on to the piece of design work.

Application of lacquer

This process is by which lacquer is melted in fire and a layer of this molten lacquer is poured onto the design work. This layer can be set into a thickness desired by the designer. This process of lacquer application is locally called *Laa hingun*. There are a few different ways in which this work is done. For instance, if the work is to be done on a working stick, a piece of lacquer is melted into thread-like strings which is then wrapped around the stick and heated simultaneously so that the

lacquer sticks to the piece of wood. Dried banana leaves or dried palm leaves are used for this purpose.

Laa hingun is also done on various other objects such as coconut shells, glass or ceramic plates and shells etc. For these objects, the required amount of lacquer is melted onto the object and then polished and finished accordingly.

In addition to those mentioned above, various writings and drawings could be made on the lacquer by heating the tip of an iron or other metallic needle. In the process different colours could be added to the writings and drawings as previously stated in colouring. The top layer is then engraved to disclose the underneath colour in the desired





Another type of lacquer application is called *Laa jehun* refers to the process where lacquer is stamped onto an object without melting it using heat. This is usually done by using a stand called *dhigu haru* or *bomakandhu* (this is a branch of a tree known as *kandhu*). The *bomakandhu* is worked from both sides and the lacquer is

brought into contact with the moving wood so that the friction produced between the two objects and the subsequent heat melts the lacquer, which is then applied to the object. Nowadays, electrical machinery is used to work the *bomakandhu* and produce friction.

In this process it is essential that the top layer of lacquer is engraved while it is still hot so that the finishing would be immaculate.

The most indigenous form of lacquer work is that done in double layers on the object. In this case only the top layer is polished and the top layer differs from the layer underneath in that it will be of a darker colour than the bottom layer. The double layer is used to display a form of design or writing etc on the bottom layer, on which a lighter color is used to display the design more effectively.

In recent times lacquer work has been done on many different kinds of objects, including boxes with varying measurements. The first such complex work was done and presented to Queen Elizabeth II, when she visited the Maldives in 1972.

Thun'du kunaa



Thun'du kunaa or mat weaving is one of the most prominent, if not the most, of Maldivian craftsmanship. These mats are used traditionally for sleeping, seating or praying. Only a knife (used for splitting screw-pine leaves) is used for making kunaa besides the loom of wood with the reed of split bamboo. At present, the warp for the cheaper mats are made by unpicking polypropylene sacks.

Fine pattern grass kunaa from G.Dh. Gadhdhoo were used as royal gifts in the past when these mats were given as gifts to the Dutch and British governors of Ceylon from the Sultan of Maldives. These were sometimes trimmed with gold lace work. At present grass mats are given to foreign dignitaries as gifts. Designers of tourist resorts and hotels use kunaa as floor mats and wall

hangings. They are very popular as souvenirs to tourists too.

Kunaa weavers cultivate their own grass and collect the leaves and roots which are used for dyeing. The designs in these kunaa are in four colors – natural, yellow, brown and black. The bark of the 'uni' tree is dried and powdered to prepare ground dye. To make the black dye, the brown-dyed grass is first soaked on a bed of uni leaves until the water evaporates. This grass is then boiled in a mixture of coconut oil and water. The liquor is left to cool till the water evaporates. This whole process is repeated three times after which the grass is washed in the sea and dried in the shade. To prepare the yellow dye pieces of root from the 'ahi' tree are soaked, then boiled together with the grass for about two hours. After which the grass is boiled in liquor of fresh water, sea water, and ground turmeric for about an hour. To prepare natural color, the grass is bleached in the sun for a week.

These mats are woven to traditional patterns with small variations which are usually introduced by individual weavers. Sleeping mats, prayer mats, swing seat mats, etc each have specific patterns. Each of these patterns have a name such as 'cutlines design', 'lockmat', 'large mat' 'dhigulu kunaa', 'gon'di kunaa' and 'namaadhu kunaa', etc.

Beauty and complexity of the design usually determine the price of these mats.

Feyli viyun - Handloom



Traditionally, *feyli* has been a part of Maldivian dress and has been a part of the Maldivian culture for a long time with records even as far as 1340s. Feyli was worn both by men and women in Maldives during the monarchy. Men wore the materials on formal occasions while women wore it both formally and informally.

The types of feyli

Three different types of Feyli are found categorized on the basis of their measurements and are as follows;

1. *Bolu Feyli* - which was part of the formal wear of both men and women.
2. *Thinfatheege Feyli* - which was

normally worn by men, and
3. *Hatharufatheege Feyli* – which was normally worn by women as a wrap around

Note: Bolu Feyli and Hatharufatheege Feyli were designed separately for high ranking officials and common people.

Another basis of categorization were based on the names given to them for official occasions, and they are as follows;

1. Unandhin Feyli or Unu Endhi Feyli
2. Mathee Feyli
3. Bolu Feyli
4. Raiy Feyli (gus Feyli)
5. Bolu Feyli (Thuni Feyli)
6. Dholhi Feyli
7. Hikadhi Feyli

Uses of Feyli

Apart from the use of feyli as a part of the National Dress of women and for the purpose of cultural events, feyli has not been worn in recent years. Feyli was mostly worn during the monarchy, more specifically up till 1932.

During the monarchy when the feyli was mostly used, it was generally worn by officials in the military, those in politics, sheikhs (religious leaders) and aristocrats. When completing the official dress code, feyli was worn around the head, waist and hand accordingly.

It was also worn by Maldivian delegates when representing Maldives in foreign countries. It was also used as a flag marking the tents of Maldivian pilgrims during Hajj.

Feyli viyun (Handloom) Contd.

The main part of the feyli weaving process is the *viyaa haru*, the machinery used for weaving. Parts of the machinery and other materials needed for weaving are listed below.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Dhathi | 11. Ven haru |
| 2. Kaali (a type of wooden frame) | 12. Firoashi |
| 3. Saraka (wheel) | 13. Ulhadhathi |
| 4. Kolhu mathee | 14. Ven |
| 5. Ulha dhathi | 15. Nolhi |
| 6. Viyaa Nolhi | 16. Theyri |
| 7. Obi | 17. Loakashi |
| 8. Bonbi | 18. Thathun |
| 9. Bamun | 19. Kani |
| 10. Ulha haru | 20. Mushigandu |

Those listed above are used in different quantities for varying types of Feyli and some other items not listed are also used during the process.

Preparing to weave

Since the feyli is made from cotton or 'ui', the first step in the weaving process is to prepare the required amount of material for the process. The masters of feyli weavers use a combination of the most fine material and cotton which is just a tad bit thicker in a ratio of 4:3 respectively. Also, since the feyli is made up of three colors, the material has to be colored first.

The three colors used in the Feyli are brown; black and white used in the ratio 4:1 1/2:1 1/2 respectively.



Weaving

1. Wrap around Feyli

During the weaving process the different parts of the machine is adjusted according to the colors used in the feyli.

The part of the Feyli that is the most important and that shows off the creativity of the weaver is the “kolhumathi”, the top and the bottom of the feyli, which is worked on with jewels according to a set design.

2. Bolu feyli (wrapped around the head)

The special feature of the bolu feyli and the artistry of the weaver is shown by the different designs made on the feyli with *kasabu* (needlework using gold and silver thread, the original of which is very expensive and of very high quality).

The color, measurement and design of different types of feyli described above are based on the current trend of how feyli is worn in the Maldives.

Many other types of Feyli, other than those used as a wrap around, have a varying number of colors. Information on how these colors were combined and used are very rare and in fact, in the case of the bolu feyli (head scarf) information on the combination of colors, the intense

amount of work done to make it shiny and sparkling are now almost non-existent.

During the “golden days” of the feyli, islands such as Dhevvadhu, Fodhdhu and Kachcheymidhu were famous for its colour combination and workings with *kasabu*. In recent time, Baa Atoll Eydhafushi is well known for its feyli weaving.

On average, it takes about 30 minutes to weave a wrap around feyli. Apparently, with time allocations, one feyli gets woven in 3 days time. It is impossible to learn to weave by reading about it as it is to write and tell all about it. It would take at least 6 months intense training to learn how to weave the feyli.



Sataa, saanthi and fangi

Sataa and *saanthi* are crafted by diagonally weaving screw pine leaves. The fundamental difference between the two is that for the former, coarse strips are applied in contrast to the fine strips used in the production of *saanthi*. History shows that these products are embedded in the Maldivian culture where these are used for sleeping and seating purposes.

Overtime the craft have evolved and have been successfully adapted in tourist resorts where they are used for ceiling panels.

Fungi are panels of plaited cadjan or palm fronds, traditionally used for fences, walls and roofing of houses in islands. At present, *fungi* are mainly used for roofing in resorts.

Basketry

The hard portion of spine of palm frond or the woody skeleton of the coconut palms are used in various arts of basketry. Like lacquer work, Baa Atoll is renowned for the art. Historically household products such as covers for food, sieves and winnowers are forms of basketry.

Like *sataa* and *saanthi*, basketry has developed to encompass products such as waste baskets, shades for lamps, containers for fruits, etc.

Coir rope

The outer fibre of coconuts and twine are hand-twisted to produce coir rope which has been commonly used in boats and the construction of 'fungi' houses or other similar uses of rope or twine.

Modern uses of coir are in the production of *fungi* in tourist resorts. The production process is such husks are retted for a period of a month after which they are beaten with a club made from wood which separates the fibre and the non-usable material. After washing and drying and rolling into slubs the fibre are spun into coir on the thighs and they are doubled by use of hand through the use of a forked stick.



Stone Carving

In the ancient days, corals are used as a material to build durables. Corals have been used in construction of mosque, walls and in mound. It is also used in the making of tombstones.

Tools used in stone carving

Most commonly used tool in Maldivian stone carving are *furoa*, *odaa*, drill, hammer, wooden baton and rasp.

Process of carving

There are three ways of stone carving in construction of a building or produce an item. One way is by smoothing the edges. Large coral piece could also be put in the stand (*dhiguharu*) to produce desired texture.

Corals are also carved with *bomakandhu haru* (a stand). In all these carving methods, raw corals are easier to work with and most cases corals are left in the sea and part by part are removed and taken to work with.



Blacksmith

In Dhivehi language blacksmith is referred as *Kanburuverikan*. Maldivian use metals such as copper and aluminum to create objects.

Blacksmith is one of the ancient craft works that reflects Maldivian heritage and is carried out by many Maldivian artisans.

Use of Blacksmith

Tools used in fishery, agriculture, carpentry and *raaverikan*, are products of Maldivian blacksmiths. Blacksmiths create such products as light fixtures, tools, cooking utensils, fishing hooks, iron anchor, nails, kitchen and farm knives and axes. A skilled blacksmith can, with minimal effort, make a sophisticated product that looks good and demonstrates ingenuity.

First coins used in Maldivian economy were also made by local blacksmiths and this government trade mark was produced only by a government authorized and appointed person.

With the introduction of electricity, this work has seen a tremendous development in the tools used as well as the methods. However, blacksmiths in the early days were carried in a very unsafe manner, without taking any safety precautions.

People from Addu atoll are famous for their blacksmith.

Tools used in blacksmith.

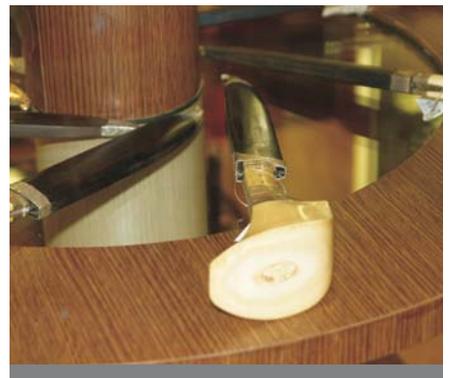
Tools generally used by blacksmith are listed below;

- a) *Girunbaa*
- b) *Undhun*
- c) *Kirunu*
- d) *Mushi* (Hammer)
- e) *Viruvaa unbu*
- f) *Thaggandu*
- g) *Dhathi*
- h) *Saw*
- i) *Handas and Kakuni*
- j) *Feeru*

The process of Blacksmithing

Blacksmiths work by heating pieces of wrought iron or steel in a forge until the metal becomes soft enough to be shaped with tools such as a hammer. Heating is accomplished by the use of a forge fueled by coal, charcoal or coke. Colour is important for indicating the temperature and workability of the metal.

Sometimes the metals are heated, liquefied and poured into desired pre-structured cast/swage/frame.



Welding

Welding is the joining of metals of the same or similar kind such that there is no visible joint. A mix of water, copper powder, to a pre defined proportion is poured into the joint and then the mix is heated or burnt. Joints could also be welded by using the mix of silica (*Fulhithoshi*) and clay (*eetu kundi*).

Finishing

Depending on the intended use and the quality of the piece a blacksmith may finish an item in a number of ways. Rasp could be used to bring a simple finish where as sand paper and other specialized chemicals could be used to bring a shining finish to the piece

Engraving

Blacksmith used engraving to decorate and inscribe metalwork. Most commonly used tool in hand engraving is chisels.



Marketing Channels



Marketing channels vary from one geographical location to another. Islands such as Thulhaadhoo are blessed with resort islands nearby who takes up a reasonable proportion of the total production. Furthermore, an island which has resorts in close proximity has the opportunity to exhibit their artisanship to tourists traveling on excursions to these islands. The survey findings on the subject of channels of distribution of handicrafts across the country revealed that there were 7 major channels –

1. Male',
2. Resorts,
3. Within the island,

4. Made to order,
5. Nearby islands,
6. Souvenir shops and
7. To the Maldives Industrial Exhibition which is held by the then Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Sales of products within the island and to nearby islands represent those islands which have a productive or brand image and thus a competitive edge in a particular type of craft such as Thulhaadhoo in Baa Atoll.

Due to the geophysical nature of the Maldives and the strong clustering of resorts nearby Male' means that sales to the capital represent a fair amount whereby products are procured by middlemen and channeled to souvenir shops both in Male' and the resorts.

Direct sales to resort islands comprise of key products such as sataa and basketry whereby the production of such handicrafts are organized through formal mechanisms such as women's committees or island offices. Such handicrafts are largely used for decorative aspects such as 'fangi' for roofing and basketry utilized in restaurants, etc.

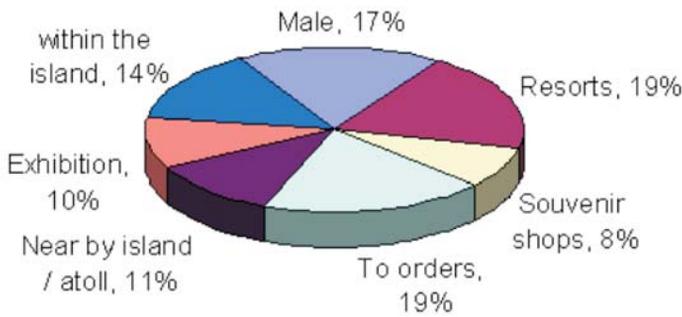
As depicted in the graph below, direct sale to souvenir shops ranked the lowest together with products represented in the industrial exhibition and sales to nearby islands following closely.

Direct sales to tourist resorts and made to order category ranked equally in the top with both the categories comprising 40% of the total sales. Sales to Male' followed with 17% and yet lower percentage of 14% represented by the category of sales within the island.

It should be noted that the category of

products sold within the island (which comes to 14% of the total) includes those sold to tourists visiting the islands on excursions from nearby resorts.

The chart below represents means by which handicraft producers sell their products.



Employment patterns and availability of skilled craftsmen and women

As identified by Holbourne (1990) the typical scenario in small islands is that with the exception of those few who work for the government, most operate as self-employed. It is a common phenomenon that a significant proportion of craftsmen and women have secondary sources of employment which they resort to depending on the availability of time.

Production of handicrafts in the Maldives is exercised heavily as family businesses. This is especially so in relation to products such as lacquer ware in Baa Atoll where most productions are based on family units with the exception of instances whereby friends of family are sometimes brought into the circle in apprenticeship programmes.

Another key revelation is that certain products are highly dominated by men such as lacquer ware and blacksmithing whilst others are heavily dominated by women like making of rope, works of gold lacing in traditional dresses known as kasab, etc.

Profit-sharing operations are common too especially in relation to building of boats where these operations are fundamentally operated on a temporary basis and seldom on a permanent means.

Research shows that there are many skilled craftsmen and women in the islands that have been studied. As argued by Mr. Mohamed Nizam, Island Chief of GA. Gemanafushi, "We have significant number of handicraft producers who could use traditional skills and materials to produce handicraft. However the influx of cheap imports and the resultant deterioration in their competitiveness in the industry have led to these workers transforming to other types of professions which are more favourable".

It is not only the case with Gemanafushi, but a wide array of islands such as N. Maradhoo, Ha. Ihavandhoo, Th. Hirilandhoo and the like, who have the necessary skills, ability and resources to produce traditional handicraft products.



Issues facing the Handicraft Industry in the Maldives

Like all open economies in the world, Maldives too have had a share of effects from the global phenomena of globalization. The demand for more modern products such as tailored clothing, complex housing needs and the increase in the service industry in the Maldives has led to a decline in the number of people producing traditional handicrafts in the country.

Even though there is a market for these traditional handicrafts, with the increase in the number of tourists visiting the country, the labour force decline has impacted the handicraft industry immensely. Decreased production led to the import of goods from nearby countries, which has yet again created a subsequent problem by being demanded more by the customers compared to the more expensive local products made from imported raw materials with little labour.

Some of the weaknesses and threats facing the handicraft industry in Maldives include;

- Little product innovation – producers are not completely aware of the tastes of the modern tourists and continue to use tools and machinery that have been used since the beginning that have become less productive and hence, it has been difficult

for the Maldivian handicraft industry to gain a competitive advantage over other nearby countries where more modern and upgraded technology are used.

- The local handicraft items are considerably more expensive than those imported. As a result, tourist shops in Male' and those in the island have a higher demand for cheap imported handicraft than those produced by local handicraftsmen.

- Lack of raw materials needed in the production is also one of the main factors affecting the industry today. For instance, lacquer work is one of the areas in the handicraft industry that has the most demand from the locals as well as the tourists. However, lacquer, being an imported product contributes to the high price demanded by craftsmen and in turn leads to decrease in popularity and the switch to imported goods.

- Since the handicraft industry in the Maldives currently lacks to produce a stable source of income for the producers, they are unwilling to leave the jobs that currently provide a steady flow of income and switch to crafting.

Potential of the handicraft industry

According to a research done by the ADB (2006), Maldivian handicrafts currently have a local market share of less than 1 % according to wholesalers. Nevertheless, local stakeholder working in the sector or related sectors, see a significant potential for locally produced handicrafts especially in the demand from tourists. According to the report which was based on interviews with handicraft producers, wholesalers, retailers and the Maldivian Association of Tourism Industry (MATI) it was established that the handicrafts sector has a potential estimated volume of US\$ 30million a year, with the potential to grow up to US\$ 50 million within the next five years.

These figures are based upon the following calculation: 600,000 tourists currently visit the Maldives annually spending an estimated US\$ 50 per person for souvenirs/handicrafts. With more than thirty new resorts under construction or in planning conservative estimates of the Tourism Industry predict 1,000,000 tourist arrivals in 2010.

A snapshot query amongst tourists in two resorts gave an indication of tourists' preferences for souvenirs:

Should relate to the holiday destination (produced in the Maldives or the region)
Form and function combined in one

product (e.g.: Sunhats made of palm leaves, T-shirts with local print or painting, blouse in traditional style, jewelry of black coral). Modern designs with an "indigenous flair"



National Handicraft Centre



In the year 2006 Ministry of Economic Development and Trade (MEDT) has developed the concept and working model for the National Handicraft Centre to be established in Male' with the aim of promoting local handicrafts. It is envisioned that the two million Rufiyaa project would remove current market inefficiencies by acting as a purchaser and reseller of local handicrafts to give these products a better chance of competing with imported goods.

The handicraft sector has the potential for:

- local economic development

(through focusing of production in northern and southern development nodes)

- employment generation through the increase of market share
- creation of new Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), growth of existing SMEs

- creation of handicraft clusters
- income generation for poorer segments of the population in the Atolls

• The Centre would be a Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) measure, government owned but managed by a private party. This Centre is to have a long list of duties and responsibilities in regard to supporting Maldivian handicrafts. Duties for the NHC include:

- Removing price distortions by eliminating middlemen (e.g. tour guide commissions);

- Providing a stable market outlet for producer.

• Should the model of the NHC be conducive to handicrafts development, MEDT would explore the possibility of two "satellite" centres in the Atoll capitals of the Northern and Southern Development Region.

The branding initiative - Authentic Maldivian Products



The branding initiative – Authentic Maldivian Product – is a national stamp/brand to be affixed on locally produced handicrafts to facilitate product promotion and marketing.

The establishment of national branding for handicrafts products, Authentic Maldivian Product, and the promotion of this brand is believed to be one of the

main success factors to support local products in addition to the setting up of the National Handicraft Center (NHC). The main goal of such a brand is to signal to customers quality, local development and cultural heritage. Initial interviews with tourists show that there is a demand for local products, however, that these are often indistinguishable from cheap imported goods due to lack of labeling and the market domination of imports. The purchase of a “100% Maldives” branded product would appeal to tourists so that they know they are supporting the local economy.

The Maldives National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is to be given the legal mandate for applying and enforcing this stamp/brand.

Blank Page



Enterprise Development Unit
Ministry of Economic Development and Trade

Ghazee Building | Male' | Republic of Maldives | contact@trademin.gov.mv | www.trademin.gov.mv