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A journey about social entrepreneurship – for international exchange and networking

● The project idea

- An international meeting place for women about gender equality, sustainability, empowerment and social inclusion
- Highlight good examples and role models of the work of social enterprises that are working with recycling, textile and handicraft
- The meeting place will contribute to exchange of experience, development of new ideas, establish contacts and build a network for the participants from all countries





The name Rag2Rug says it all

The name Rag2Rug says it all. The social enterprise in Vetlanda, a small town in southern Sweden transforms worn out sheets and other fabrics that not even second hand stores can sell, to beautiful bags, key chains and carpets.

"I started this to make a dream come true", Gunilla Hjelm explains. "I was at a turning point in my life and saw this possibility to combine my commitment for the environment and handicraft with empowering women who have difficulties finding regular jobs."

"Most of them are refugees who don't know the Swedish language yet and have little or no experience from a traditional labour market."

Why weaving?

Gunilla Hjelm laughs when she tells that the idea of weaving was based on a misunderstanding.

"We thought that weaving was something that women across the globe had in common and that every culture had their own weaving traditions, techniques and patterns. I guess that is true but the women we have met here had no more tradition or experience than what is common in Sweden today. When I checked more I learned that Sweden is actually one of the countries where the weaving tradition still is strong compared to many other countries."

Rag2Rug started 2017 as a two year project financed by the European Social Fund. The Swedish Employment Service chose participants among the women who were long-term unemployed. Most of them were migrants who had come to Sweden as refugees. Some couldn't read and write in their own language and therefore had a hard time learning Swedish. Many, but not all, lacked formal education. Nobody knew about weaving but all were enthusiastic to learn and get a chance to take the first steps towards a life with financial independence.



Gunilla Hjelm executive manager of Rag2Rug.

The idea of the enterprise

The original idea came from Gunilla Hjelm's best friend who in 2015 was diagnosed with a terminal illness. During the sickness period the two women elaborated the future enterprise.

“I think it worked as a coping strategy for both of us, we could focus on something else. My friend died a year later but I still feel her presence as if she is checking me from wherever she is now.”

Gunilla Hjelm is a computer engineer and former politician but has lived with handicraft since childhood. Her mother has always been working on the loom and taught her daughter the skills.

“She has made so many beautiful things, most of them practical like rugs and towels, but also artistic things. I often discuss designs and techniques with her.”

Using rags to create new products and social impact

Gunilla Hjelm had all the necessary connections. The local and state agencies liked her idea and helped with finding premises as well as participants. The looms were donated and so were the rags. A charity based second hand store gave her the raw material, mainly sheets and curtains that they couldn't sell.

“I paid for a company to dye some of the fabric but the investments were small, a few things for the office, tools to cut the fabric into rags and the warp thread. As soon as all of that was in place I started teaching how to weave.”

Weaving with a big loom is not rocket science but one needs to be precise and have the feeling. The women who came for training had that. Over the years 65 women have received training, combined with learning Swedish. Of the women 25 per cent have moved on to other types of jobs. One woman who was very skilled with the sewing machine has a full time regular employment at a furniture business.

“Weaving is a very hands-on skill and we have managed to communicate by using practical methods, showing by hands and gestures as well as using easy Swedish. It has worked out better than anyone thought. Most of the women have been working here half day and then they walked to a nearby Swedish language school. To be able to live and work in Sweden you have to know the language, there is no way to get around that.”

How is it possible to make hand woven products profitable?

“We thought this through from the start. To weave a linen tablecloth is impossible. It takes too long, nobody will be able to pay the weaver a decent salary. The only products that can work are carpets and other things made of rags. This is a traditional technique in Sweden and you can find rag rugs in most homes.”

RAG2RUG

- Started in 2017
- Located in a small town, Vetlanda in the county of Småland in the south of Sweden
- Social enterprise with a unique business idea
- Two women working
- Training from unemployment agency
- Women who are a long way from the regular labour market



Sahra Guled Ali at the loom.





Sahra Guled Ali and Gunilla Hjelm.

“We add a design to them and don’t make many traditional rag rugs. My daughter told me she would never buy a traditional striped rag rug so we designed a chess patterned version. It is a more modern design, and it has also opened up new possibilities.”

Sahra Guled Ali is one of the two employees. Her husband is dead and she left Somalia with her four children. Today she has a paid job, instead of income support from the state, something that means a lot, both financially and for her self esteem.

She was one of those who had never seen a loom before but is now an expert, especially on the tricky parts. She is also fast. During one day she can produce five or six bathroom mats, one of the most popular products.

“We make the mats from worn out hotel sheets. Those are usually white in Sweden. We are collaborating with four hotels that sell the mats in their lobbies. Many guests like the idea of bringing home this kind of memory from the hotel visit. The mats can also, like all other products, be bought through the internet shop www.rag2rug.se.”

Design together

Gunilla Hjelm is the designer but the elaboration of new products is



Working together with

- Unemployment agency
- Vetlanda municipality
- Second Hand
- Company that makes colours on textile
- Companies that sell the products
- Hotels
- And more ...

made together with the women. There are always a lot of details to think about. And sometimes time will show that even if the product is great it takes too much time to make. That was the case with a woven basket which therefore was taken out of production.

“Some of my own ideas also had to change. I told the women that Swedish people mostly like beige and gray for carpets. No no, they protested. People like colours! Today I know that I was wrong and they were right. We sell more of the colourful products than my original Scandinavian design ideas.”



All of the colours.

The region of Småland where Rag2Rug is situated is a centre for local entrepreneurs and small businesses. Ikea is only one of many companies from this area that started out in very small scale. Ikea was represented in the jury that chose Rag2Rug as a winner of a national competition for social entrepreneurs 2020.

"Nyttigaste affären (the most useful business) was a very prestigious award", says Gunilla Hjelm. "There was no money but the prize is a door opener which makes it easier to create new deals. I hope to work more business-to-business and was in touch with several companies who are big on interior decoration on a national level. But then came the corona pandemic."



National prize Nyttigaste Affären 2020

- <http://nyttigasteaffaren.se/2020-ars-vinnare/>

The tough year and future plans

2020 has been a tough year. The deals were put on pause. The hotels had no guests which meant that the demand for bathroom mats was small. No local markets were held. Gunilla Hjelm could not take any salary for herself. The income barely covered the salary for Sahra Guled Ali and Souhad Hader who is of Palestinian origin and fled from Iraq.

"I see this year as a turning point. If things don't improve I will have to close."

The plan is to survive. The market is there. The looms also. Since Rag2Rug started Gunilla Hjelm has been offered around 70 looms that people have inherited but no longer have use, or place, for.

"I dream of starting local branches of Rag2Rug, there certainly is a need for social enterprises like this. I am convinced that the persons I have managed to employ could take care of the business in Vetlanda while I teach and train new women in other towns."

"Over the years we have all learned so much. Since only women work here we can talk about many subjects that would be impossible if men were present. We learn from each other's cultures, cooking for instance. Today I can make my own falafel and Somalian samosas."

As most, maybe all, entrepreneurs, Gunilla Hjelm is constantly developing new ideas for Rag2Rug. Bags, seat cushions, carpets, bed runners and bathroom mats are all popular but what else could be produced?

"The latest product is a woven key chain. It is easy and fast to make, and seems to be really popular."



We have achieved this so far

- Every week we recycle one bag of textile that would otherwise be thrown away.
- We produce, weave and sell seven different products from recycled textiles by us, at retailers and through social media.
- From May 2017 to 2020 about 50 women have been with us to work training or internships. About 25 % of them have moved on to different types of jobs.
- Right now two of these women work at Rag2Rug.
- Collaboration with hotels to recycle hotel textiles and weave new product.



The film about Rag2Rug 2020

- https://www.instagram.com/_rag2rug_/channel/?hl=sv