



CASE STUDY

I WAS A SARI

Crafting change, one sari at a time

I was a sari

mumbai | milan

I was A Sari (2nd Innings Handicrafts)

<https://iwasasari.com/>

I was a Sari is a Mumbai-meets-Milan fashion label that boldly crafts accessories and ready-to-wear garments from pre-loved Indian saris. Established in 2013, the Mumbai-based social enterprise is on a mission to transform disempowered communities by offering them a second chance at life. The purpose here is not just creating fashion; it's creating empowerment and sustainability.



PROBLEM - SOLUTION

The fashion industry is the world's second-most polluting sector after the oil industry. Fashion production makes up 10% of humanity's carbon emissions, dries up water sources, and pollutes rivers and streams, and 85% of all textiles go to the dump each year¹.

And so I was a Sari is driven by a sense of urgency. By upcycling pre-loved Indian saris and a myriad of other materials, they prevent waste and reduce the fashion industry's environmental impact.

Waste is seen as an opportunity and discarded materials find a new purpose. This solution not only tackles the environmental challenge but also empowers women in marginalised communities by offering them an opportunity to shape a brighter future for themselves. I was a Sari is a zero-dividend social enterprise, which means they reinvest 100% of their profits into the development of their business and into uplifting underprivileged women.

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1- <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/sustainable-fashion/>

BUSINESS MODEL

At I was a Sari, the business model centers on extracting value from what others consider waste. This includes various raw materials, such as pre- and post-consumer dead stocks, and making the most of idle machine time. They take the lead in product design, material sourcing, sales, marketing, logistics, and quality control, while partner NGOs and producer companies take care of production and empower local artisans from marginalised communities. Their flagship lifestyle brand, I was a Sari, generates 100% of their company revenues and all of their profits are reinvested into the development of their business and uplifting underprivileged women.



CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN ACTION

The heart of their approach is upcycling, breathing new life into pre-loved Indian saris and other materials. By transforming materials that would have otherwise ended up in landfills, they demonstrate that waste can be valuable. Their circularity extends to the lives of women artisans they work with, empowering them to become the designers of their own future. Fair income and training ensure that the circularity principle extends to the very heart of their workforce, transforming fabrics and lives simultaneously.

The enterprise aligns its efforts with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically focusing on No Poverty, Gender Equality, Decent Work and Economic Growth and Responsible Production and Consumption.

WOMEN IN SUSTAINABILITY

I was a Sari firmly believes that promoting women's leadership in the circular economy, sustainability, and resource efficiency sectors is not just a matter of equity but also a necessity for driving transformative change. They train unskilled women artisans, providing them with the skills necessary to become proficient in tailoring who transition to on-the-job training, gaining hands-on experience in fashion and design. This commitment extends to inclusivity at every level, with over 90% of their colleagues being women, who play integral roles across all aspects of the business. With the skills and opportunities to craft beautiful sustainable products, the women are able to transform fabrics and their own lives.

MEASURING IMPACT

Empowering Women: A core mission of I was a Sari is to empower women from marginalised communities, allowing them to write their own success stories. They have empowered 650 Indian women to become artisans, designers, and makers of their own destinies.

Reducing Fabric Waste: One of our most significant environmental achievements is the prevention of 1.4 million square meters of fabric from ending up in landfills. In an industry notorious for waste, they have made a meaningful dent in the cycle of disposal by reclaiming and transforming materials that would have otherwise contributed to the growing textile waste crisis.

Fair Wages: Over the years, I was a Sari has remunerated 1 million hours of fair wages to our women artisans. By providing fair income to these women, they are not only improving their own lives but also enriching the communities they belong to. Fair wages bring dignity, opportunity, and the chance to build brighter futures.

650 women trained
and employed

1.4 million sq m fabric
diverted from landfills

1 million hours of fair
wages earned by women

GROWTH PLANS

'I was a Sari' is poised for substantial growth in the coming year, driven by an unwavering commitment to sustainability, social impact, and responsible fashion. With the women artisans at the centre of their storytelling narrative, they plan to expand their product line with innovative and consumer-centric products to meet the evolving needs of their customers. The ecosystem of partners, integral to their capacity and impact, will be further developed, nurturing existing collaborations and seeking new ones that align with their values. A data-driven approach to sustainability is a priority, aimed at quantifying and certifying their achievements and impact.

Improved governance, refined processes, and enhanced management tools will ensure they remain a trusted brand. With ambitious strategic goals for the next three years, I was a Sari intends to set the benchmark for what it means to be a sustainable fashion brand while remaining at the forefront of empowering women & creating positive social impact.

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

- Winner Circular Design Challenge 2019
- Winner of Eco Age's Green Carpet 2019 award
- Support of luxury label Gucci for their commendable work in the circular economy

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MEET THE FOUNDER

Stefano Funari, Founder and CEO



Hailing from Italy, Stefano Funari embarked on a transformative journey that led him to a remarkable mission of making a positive impact on the world. His passion for social change and

dedication to empowering women and children took him to Mumbai, where he initially established shelters for street children. His firsthand experience of the challenging realities on the streets of Mumbai fueled a realisation of his true purpose — to bring about meaningful change in the lives of women and children, one step at a time. To equip himself for this mission, he dedicated time to studying social business models alongside influential figures like Nobel Laureate Mohamed Yunus.

In his professional journey, Stefano had the opportunity of being part of various entrepreneurial ventures. However, it was in 2013, a decade ago, that he made a conscious shift to become a social entrepreneur when he founded I was a Sari. “The transition to becoming a social entrepreneur wasn’t a hasty decision; rather, it was the culmination of an organic process that unfolded over several years,” he says. “It took time for me to make the commitment to launch a business with a primary mission of creating both social and environmental impact.”

In 2013, Stefano founded I was a Sari — a unique venture aimed at merging Milanese design aesthetics with the iconic Indian sari. At its core, I was a Sari is about empowering women facing extraordinary circumstances, providing them with the skills to become artisans. “My vision extends beyond the immediate horizon. I aspire to build a platform that celebrates businesses with a meaningful purpose, with I was a Sari marking the first inspiring chapter in this endeavor.”

Today, my dedicated Mumbai-meets-Milan team, comprising 270 artisans, is working tirelessly to make this vision a reality.

**"We don't need another fashion brand,
but we do need one with purpose"**



ABOUT CIRCULEAD

CircuLead is designed to empower women entrepreneurs building innovative solutions in the Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy. The programme aims to support women leaders to strengthen their business models, deepen their leadership skills and learn from peers through a hybrid, immersive learning experience. The EU-Resource Efficiency Initiative (EU-REI) is implementing this capacity building programme with support from [Nüshu Network](#), powered by [Unlock Impact](#).

ABOUT EU-RESOURCE EFFICIENCY INITIATIVE

European Union's Resource Efficiency Initiative (EU-REI) (2017-2023) for India and aims to support India in the implementation of the United Nations global Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) agenda by way of adapting international standards and best practices in business on resource efficiency and circular economy and fostering the efficient and sustainable use of natural resources. The EU-REI aims to facilitate partnerships between Indian and European businesses and stakeholders on Resource Efficiency (RE) and Circular Economy economy in sectors of interest.

EU-REI acts as an important vehicle for the India-EU Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy Partnership.

It is implemented on behalf of the European Union by a consortium led by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH with The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), Confederation of the Indian Industry (CII) and adelphi.

ABOUT UNLOCK IMPACT AND NÜSHU NETWORK

[Unlock Impact](#) is a gender-smart women-led firm dedicated to help purpose-driven enterprises succeed across South and Southeast Asia. Powered by Unlock Impact, the [Nüshu Network](#) offers community, coaching and capital for women entrepreneurs in Asia who are looking to build and grow sustainable enterprises. Since its inception, the network has delivered 2000+ hours of learning, 1000+ hours of mentoring at 50+ community events to over 500+ women entrepreneurs.

ABOUT adelphi

[adelphi](#) is Europe's leading independent think-and-do tank for climate, environment and development. We are some 350 strategists, thought leaders and practitioners working at the local and global levels to find solutions to the most urgent political, economic and social challenges of our time. As a policy consultancy, we support a just transition towards carbon neutrality and sustainable, liveable societies. Our work is grounded in transdisciplinary research, evidence-based consulting and stakeholder dialogues. With these tools we shape policy agendas, facilitate political communication, inform policy processes and support decision-makers.

