

BRAC's social enterprises are both financially and socially profitable ventures. Its flagship enterprise, Aarong, carved out a unique market segment for 65,000 rural artisans – 85 per cent of whom are women. Today, Aarong (meaning 'village fair' in Bengali) is one of Bangladesh's largest lifestyle retail chains.

In 1976 when BRAC employed rural women in Manikganj district in silk production, their only buyers were a few scattered retailers in Dhaka city. Weeks, even months would pass between supply and payment. And so Aarong was born two years later – a BRAC retail outlet to ensure that these silk farmers were paid for their goods on time.

Over the course of time Aarong carved out a unique market segment for traditional crafts and designs and, in the process, created income generating opportunities for thousands of artisans. As Aarong grew we saw the emergence of small entrepreneurs, and together they engaged in fair trade. Each of these entrepreneurs now creates opportunities – similar to what Aarong had provided for them – for thousands more rural women and men. This results in over 325,000 people benefiting directly and indirectly from Aarong's extensive operation.



Photo credit: BRAC/Shehzad Noorani

Artisan embroidering her work with care

Looking after its artisans

Aarong ensures that its artisans have access to BRAC's multifaceted development programmes, so that the support they receive extends well beyond simply their wages. A snapshot of Aarong's artisan development initiative (ADI) on any given month at the Ayesha Abed Foundation (AAF) production centres will show a safe and nurturing space providing holistic support to artisans – with awareness on hygiene and sanitation, ante- and post-natal care, referral services to free legal aid clinics and government's social protection programmes, and much more. In 2014, a year after its launch, ADI has been scaled up to all 535 AAF sub-centres and five main centres. A health security scheme is being piloted by the AAF, whereby artisans and the AAF create a co-contributory healthcare fund that will provide for artisans and their immediate family

members' hospitalisation treatment costs.

Additionally, all of Aarong's suppliers comply with labour law and fair trade principles. Regular audits are conducted to ensure that ethical standards of health, safety and environment are maintained.

At a glance

(Figures as of May 2015)

9 million customers served

15 retail stores and e-commerce website

USD 62 million in annual sales

3,000 employees

65,000 artisans in supply chain, 800 producer groups

13 AAF craft production centres and **535 hand embroidery** sub-centres

Visit Aarong's official website at www.aarong.com