

Cambodian Knitted Plushies Help Women One Stitch at a Time

Knitting Toys for a Fair Wage Brings Relief to Marginalized Women in Cambodia

Monika Nowaczyk had no taste for business but was set on helping marginalized women in Cambodia and offering them employment opportunities. She started Cambodia Knits over ten years ago, still the only locally-made toy company that is safety-certified, working with women in and near Phnom Penh, to produce hand-knitted eco-friendly toys, allowing them to have fair and flexible employment opportunities.



PHOTO: LALY BERTHET

Monika is Polish-Canadian. Born in Poland, she grew up in Canada and has been living in Southeast Asia for over 20 years. From being a teacher in Japan to working for NGOs on educational projects in Cambodia, she initially had no taste or inclination for entrepreneurship.

However, while working with disadvantaged communities in Cambodia, she realized that what women needed the most were economic opportunities. For societal reasons and the status of women in the country, in poor areas, girls are pulled out of school, sometimes before they finish primary school. They have no chance of getting further education. Some are illiterate and lack running water or electricity.

Video: Cambodia Knits.

Monika felt that teaching them a handicraft, like knitting, “which is very portable and does not require the type of time or material as tailoring or haircutting” could provide them with fair, safe, flexible, home-based working conditions.

In 2009/2010, she put her project into action, “on a very small scale” and [Cambodia Knits](#) was born. “I never wanted to go into business,” she said, “so it was hard learning

for me.” Monika had never worked for a company and had to learn everything, from accounting to production to marketing. “Obviously, I made a lot of mistakes and failed numerous times along the way,” she remembers. “But somehow the brand took off.”

Beebee+Bongo Knitted Toys

The Covid-19 Crisis Spurs the Creation of a New Company: Beebee+Bongo



PHOTO: MICHEAL MCKAY

Before Covid, she started looking at more formalization, attracting investments, and expanding the market. When Covid-19 hit, the national market shrunk since most shops were closed for months on end. “I decided not to quit but dig in and find every possible way to survive”.

For some time Monika had been thinking that a change of name for the company was in order if it was to export its handmade toys. Pressed by the crisis, she found a business partner and registered a sister company in Singapore that could export the products in 2021: [Beebee+Bongo](#).



PHOTO: TIFFANY TSANG

Beebee+Bongo, registered in Singapore, buys from Cambodia Knits and then markets products under the Beebee+Bango brand that is more understandable and accessible to the global market.

The most popular product of Cambodia Knits is a crochet water buffalo, reflecting the familiarity and affection of Cambodians for the large bovine. The business partners originally named the knitted toy “Bong”, which is an honorific term in Cambodia but also has a different meaning in the Western world. So Bong became Bongo, and “Beebee”, the matching crochet baby water buffalo toy, is a tender sound that parents make to request a kiss from their babies.

Beebee+Bongo Knitted Toys set for Global Expansion

The manufacturing for both companies is entirely made in Cambodia, as well as the supply of raw materials. Cambodia Knits will remain the name of the company in the country, as the brand is now well known, with a large fan base, and returning customers. The company is about to launch a new line, targeted at the Cambodian market, centered around temples and Cambodian mythology, which is very rich with different kinds of creatures that will become cuddly knitted critters.



PHOTO: ANNA BELLA BETTS

Cambodia Knits’ products are sold at Cambodia Knit’s premises, in 18 shops across the country, at airports under the brand “Amazing Cambodia,” and online, but only in Cambodia.

Beebee+Bongo exports the products and sales are made online. The company has a warehouse in the United States from which a company ships all over the world. Some wholesale buyers also import the products to Australia, she said. The range of products is also wider than Cambodia Knits, with crochet educational toys, which fit with Montessori, Waldorf, and play-based learning, “sleepy animals”, “sleepy hats”, and “animals and monsters”.

Cambodia Knits Soon to be Certified as a FairTrade Company

“We are registered as a company, but we are really a social enterprise,” Monika said. “The core of our DNA has never been about making a profit, but to generate some good for society.” “If and when the company is making a profit, it is reinvested into the project as opposed to making shareholders wealthy.”



PHOTO: TIFFANY TSANG

“Our aim was to create economic opportunities for women growing up in a society that does not value them and keep them illiterate, confining them to marrying and having children.” “We wanted to correct some of the injustices, create employment, and formalize informal employment.”



PHOTO: TIFFANY TSANG

Women work on a flexible basis, at piece rates. They can work as much or as little as they want. Some women rely on their knitting work to sustain their families while others, like farmers, use knitting as supplemental income. A full-time knitter can knit 30 “sleepy animals” or 60 “monkeys” per month.

In the last year, the company has started the process to add them into the formal system by contracting them, which includes getting them on the National Health system, pension plans, and seniority pay that people do not get through informal work. “We also have two programs to build those women’s soft skills. We want to be more

than just an employer.” “We want to change the narrative around informal and handcraft work, and to support not only through formalized social protections, but to promote the value of decentralized production,” Monika explained.

Cambodia Knits is a provisional member of the World Fair Trade Organization and submitted its application in 2022. The company is expecting an audit by the end of 2023, and to be certified as a Fair-Trade company.



PHOTO: TIFFANY TSANG

Eco-friendly Toys

Beyond working their way to be Fair-Trade certified, Cambodia Knits is trying to be as eco-friendly as possible, according to Monika. The knitted toys are made out of a cotton blend with a small proportion of polyester from Thailand, made out of recycled bottles. The high quality of the toys, she added, allows parents to pass them on because they are durable and easy to wash. Parents also know they are contributing to fair work, and that the knitted stuffed animals they give their children has not been made by someone who is being mistreated or exploited.



PHOTO: LALY BERTHET

At the moment, Cambodia Knits works with 60 knitters, while they were 150 before the Covid-19 crisis. The company is however planning to expand, as sales and production are not meeting their demand.

Recent months have seen local sales soar, reaching 60 to 65 percent of combined total sales, while those numbers were reversed in the pre-Covid period.

IP Strategy in the Making with WIPO's Support



PHOTO: MONIKA NOWACZYK

Monika has worked hard to promote and market Cambodia Knits and Beebee+Bongo. Building both brands and reputation, recently defining the tagline, colors, and fonts for Beebee+Bongo and considering modernizing Cambodia Knits. As a result, sales have increased. However, neither Cambodia Knits nor Beebee+Bongo's names are protected.

Set on exploiting the benefits of IP protection and best marketing options, Monika is eager to understand and define her best IP, packaging, and marketing strategy for both companies, with the help of WIPO.

Monika is currently benefiting from remote expert mentoring sessions organized by WIPO, and is expected to participate in the expert clinics and mentoring sessions to be conducted by WIPO in Cambodia on [World IP Day](#).

Temple Collection of Knitted Dolls inspired by the Cambodia Mythology

Cambodia Knits is about to launch the "temple collection." A collection reflecting and reviving the heritage of ancient Angkor. The first item available is an "Apsara doll" that can be tailored with five skin color tones, and seven skirt colors. In the near future, the company would like to be able to deliver orders to tourists at their hotels within 24 hours. In the future, the temple collection could also be marketed to the Cambodian diaspora living around the world, established in France, the United States, and Australia.



PHOTO: ANNA BELLA BETTS

Work is ongoing on a logo, branding, and marketing, Monika explained.

In the next five years, Monika would like to be able to provide work to 2,000 to 3,000 women and become a leader in fair, formalized, home-based employment for women in Cambodia. Closer in time, this year, both companies would like to offer “go-to souvenirs” for tourists.

“Our long-term dream is also to use organic cotton, and for our toys to be compostable,” Monika added.