

# Refugee Artisan Initiative

<https://refugeesarts.org/>

## AI Generated (GLT Reviewed) Summary

Refugee Artisan Initiative (RAI) is a Seattle-based non-profit that empowers refugee and immigrant women by providing them with training, mentorship, and job opportunities in designing and manufacturing upcycled products. Since its inception in 2017, RAI has helped over 50 women achieve economic stability, generating more than \$1.4 million in earned income while diverting over 100,000 pounds of waste from landfills. By fostering financial independence and community support, RAI creates a positive ripple effect that benefits not only the artisans but also their families and the broader community.

### Q1: What does your organization do?

Refugee Artisan Initiative (RAI) is a non-profit in Seattle, Washington that partners with refugee and immigrant women as they work to achieve economic stability. We hire and train local women to design and manufacture upcycled products, and we also offer support and mentorship for artisans who aspire to launch their own micro businesses. Since RAI's founding in 2017, we have diverted over 100,000 pounds of waste from local landfills while helping over 50 local refugee and immigrant women secure more than \$1.4 million in earned income. These earnings create a ripple effect of positive change for artisans, their families, and their communities.

By surviving their journeys and arriving in the United States, refugee and immigrant women have already shown their resilience and ability to overcome obstacles. Many also use sewing skills to provide basic clothing for their families in times of need and to give back to their communities. However, after they arrive in the U.S., many refugee and immigrant women discover obstacles to their economic independence. Common barriers to their employment include childcare responsibilities, level of education or job history, lack of transportation, and language. Overall, refugee women have one of the lowest employment rates of any subgroup in the US at only 40%, according to a 2019 report by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS).

RAI's strength-based approach meets women where they are, celebrating their talents. Beginning sewers take an eight-week sewing course taught by current artisans; upon graduation, each student receives a sewing machine to take home. Intermediate and advanced seamstresses join RAI as home sewers right away (machine and tools provided by RAI) and take on projects such as handcrafting tote bags made from recycled billboards and sleeping bags made from coffee bag lining. This flexible, at-home work empowers artisans to choose their own schedule as they earn a living wage. Whatever her level, each artisan receives ongoing support from the RAI team. This includes English language practice, business license application assistance, and ongoing training in specialized skills such as tailoring and mending.

Mehnaz, an immigrant from Pakistan and RAI's Assistant Production Manager, is one of the women who has benefited from working with RAI. She explains, "When I came to the US in 2018 ... first I didn't speak English, not one word. I love to sew and I had no idea that this skill would be useful for me as a profession. Now my confidence is built, now I'm driving. If my kids need something, I'm able to do it for them. This is good for me and for others, too!"

### Q2: What communities does your organization serve and how does your staff, leadership, advisors and board reflect these communities?

RAI serves refugee and immigrant women in King County. Currently, RAI artisans are from various countries including Afghanistan, Morocco, Myanmar, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, and Vietnam. We work to ensure that refugee and immigrant women have access to entry level job opportunities that lead to long-term career pathways and financial security.

RAI's staff, leadership, advisors, and board of directors share the lived experience of the refugee and immigrant women we serve. Of our 13 staff members, all identify as female, 8 identify as BIPOC, 10 are from immigrant families or are immigrants themselves, and 5 joined RAI as contract artisans before becoming part-time or full-time staff members. Our staff includes women from many of the same countries as the artisans we currently serve. Our board also reflects the demographics of the communities we serve; all of our 8 board members identify as female, 4 identify as BIPOC, and 4 are from immigrant families or are immigrants themselves.

RAI's founder and Executive Director Ming-Ming Tung-Edelman is a Taiwanese immigrant who arrived in the US over 34 years ago, and whose grandmother raised her mother and two uncles on a single income as a seamstress in a small village in Taiwan. Ming-Ming is a veteran community organizer, as well as a passionate advocate for immigrant rights and environmental causes. In the past two years, she was named "Recycler of the Year" by the Washington State Recycling Association and received the Green Globe Award from King County in recognition of her work at RAI.

This expertise and shared experience allows RAI's staff and board members to understand and address the needs and challenges faced by the women we serve and inform our decision making processes at the highest level. As RAI's Board Chair Yumiko Damashek puts it, "RAI invests in women so they can rebuild their lives in a new country... They build confidence and purpose in a supportive environment. RAI's work has a positive impact on breaking systemic poverty that refugees and immigrants often get trapped in. Our work helps increase the odds of success in generations to come."

### **Q3: How is your organization addressing root causes of inequities to drive change?**

RAI addresses the root causes of unemployment among refugee and immigrant women by creating jobs, empowering entrepreneurship, and fostering appreciation for the diverse cultural heritages of our communities.

RAI has developed its programs in response to urgent needs in the Puget Sound area. According to the Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA), over 16,000 refugees and immigrants in Seattle lived below the federal poverty line in 2023, and poverty rates in the city were nearly 4 times higher for refugees and immigrants compared to native-born residents.

**We hold that when women earn, their whole families benefit, as do their communities.** Fostering women's financial independence and sustainability is integral to our mission, and creates a ripple effect of prosperity in our communities. As one artisan explains, "I've gotten to the point where I can start paying it forward. I now use the money I make with RAI to support other refugee families." While significant, economic stability is not the only benefit for artisans. In this safe space, women develop their confidence, learn the value of their skills, and take on leadership roles.

**1) WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:** RAI has established two programs to create work and on-the-job training for artisans: RAI Label and RAI Partner Projects. RAI was the first U.S. organization to earn Nest's Ethical Handcraft certification, which verifies that RAI products meet the highest standards for ethical, sustainable production in home or small workshop settings.

RAI Label creates goods for retail distribution. Through this program, RAI artisans produce a range of high-quality, hand-crafted products to sell online or at pop-ups. This program also allows artisans to share parts of their heritage and culture by creating products influenced by their homelands, like Burmese embroidered shawls and Ethiopia-inspired necklaces. Product sales help RAI engage with our supporters and create lasting relationships with people who believe in our mission. RAI Label also has "giveback" initiatives (supported by donations) that pay artisans to make products for free distribution to local nonprofits. For example, through the "Friendship Through Fleece" initiative, artisans make hundreds of hats and neck warmers for unhoused individuals.

The second program, RAI Partner Projects, creates purpose-built products for corporate partners. Custom merchandise helps RAI raise awareness and amplify our cause, while also creating an opportunity for our partners to champion equity and sustainability. For example, RAI artisans have been integral in diverting scrap materials to produce a number of products, including hospital scrubs, tote bags, and animal beds. Whatever the product, each project creates jobs and diverts materials from the landfill, modeling a circular economy and giving new life to old materials.

Both programs create living wage income for artisans who make the items. RAI prioritizes artisan wages: a majority of each sale goes directly to the woman who made the item. This keeps aside a small portion to help offset RAI's costs associated with infrastructure, staffing, and programming. However, this revenue does not cover the majority of RAI's expenses. As it grows,

RAI will continue to prioritize artisans receiving a majority of the income generated, so grants, donations, and community support are a critical part of its model for scale.

**2) ENTREPRENEURSHIP SUPPORT:** Some artisans decide to take their training to the next level and go beyond making products for RAI. These women embark on the journey to build their own businesses. Some focus their businesses on sewing, while some use their talents to develop businesses in other areas. RAI provides general entrepreneurship training and assistance to artisans who seek to launch businesses of all sorts. Artisan entrepreneurs working with RAI include:

- Julie, an at-home seamstress who makes custom dresses for the local Burmese community
- Baseerah, a staff artisan who is building Pashtun Palace, her catering business, and
- Adiba, an at-home sewer who is opening a home daycare business.

**3) STITCHING OUR STORIES:** RAI offers artisans a variety of paid opportunities to represent their stories, heritage, and traditions through public workshops, exhibitions, and partnerships with cultural institutions in Seattle. For instance, in 2023, RAI highlighted the artistry of Afghan sewers through a high-profile partner project with Seattle Opera. Eight artisans crafted a traditionally embroidered Kochi dress to feature at the world-premiere production of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Through projects like these, RAI ensures that artisans can gain exposure and grow their businesses in a culturally-affirming environment that values their perspective and experiences.

## **Q4: How would this award impact your organization and the communities served?**

RAI is unique in offering home-based sewing work and paid training to local women, and the demand for our programs is immense. Currently, there are over 150 women on RAI's waitlist to become artisans, and more knock on the door of the Maker Space almost daily, desperate for work.

To meet the needs of more refugee and immigrant women in the Puget Sound area, our ambitious goal is to double the number of women we serve in the next two years. A grant from Impact 100 Seattle will provide wages for new artisans as they learn and grow their skills.

For example, the latest artisan to join RAI is a refugee from Iraq and mother of four. Although she will need some additional training to prepare her to create upcycled products, during her sewing assessment she proved to be a quick learner. When we told her that we could offer her the paid opportunity to develop her skills, she shared her joy with the RAI team and let us know that this is the first time she has been able to find work in nine years. With support from Impact 100 we can create more success stories like hers and help more women achieve economic independence.

A grant from Impact 100 Seattle will also help build RAI's capacity to offer services. Currently, we are working to expand wraparound services for artisans, including ESL training, and develop more end markets for products so that we can generate more income for artisans.

## **Q5: Does your organization partner (or plan to partner) with other organizations?**

RAI's work would not be possible without the support of its partners, which include a wide variety of non-profits, corporate purchasers, mission-aligned funders, community supporters, government agencies, and recyclers.

For example, one of RAI's most innovative upcycling projects is the invention of a "sleeping bag coat." Designed by artisans with feedback from Seattle residents living unhoused, this water-resistant, insulated coat converts into a sleep sack, complete with pillow and camp mat. The secret to its warmth and comfort? Lining made from upcycled coffee bag material from Starbucks! Thanks to grant funding, RAI paid artisans to create over 100 of these coats to distribute to local shelters free of charge. This is only one example among many. Since 2017, RAI has partnered with over 20 corporations and distributed much-needed items to over 40 local organizations.

Other partnerships that have generated significant income for artisans include working with Tommy Bahama to create napkins from branded deadstock, creating 3,000 messenger bags for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Seattle, and designing custom tote bags for Dr. Jill Biden.

Additionally, RAI collaborates with other local non-profits serving refugee and immigrant communities. For example, we partner with Akin's Lake City location to ensure that artisans receive support accessing social services, while Akin refers clients looking for work to RAI.

## Q6: Is there anything you'd like to tell us that we haven't asked?

Even after their initial classes are finished, artisans who work from home return to the Maker Space every two weeks to drop off projects and pick up new supplies. These regular gatherings are opportunities for ongoing training, English language practice, and other support.

The sense of community that artisans find at RAI is deeply important. This is a safe space for women, a place where refugees and immigrants find respite and a warm welcome, express themselves in their primary language, and wear attire reflecting their cultural heritage and religious beliefs. Over sewing machines and a pot of tea, women from countries all over the world find strength in their shared experiences as they come together to make a difference for themselves, their families, and their communities.

For more information about RAI's programs, please visit:

- [RAI Website](#) (URL)
- [USA for UNHCR Featurette](#) (Video)

## Reviewer Notes

How does this organization build community power?	Teaches entrepreneurship skills
How does this organization build individual capacity?	Gives funding stream & encouragements to refugee women
How is this organization altering systemic structures and behaviors	-
Other Notes	-
Your Rating	Reviewed - No Decision

Update Notes

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