Decolonising Fashion Systems: Navigating Frictions in a Designer's Collaboration with a Vietnamese Silversmith Artisan Contributing to Culturally Sustainable Fashion Futures

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Abstract

The paper draws from ongoing practice-based PhD research grounded in the first author's decade-long embedded practice within non-Western systems. Situated within Vietnam's complex socio-cultural context, the research is shaped by lived experience, long-term relationships, and the guidance of cultural stewards who act as translators, mediators, and custodians of knowledge. This paper discusses how designer-artisan collaborations are sites of both friction and learning, where misalignment and discomfort become productive forces for rethinking knowledge and authorship. Decolonising practice requires slow, sustained engagement and the willingness to confront personal and systemic biases, not theoretical frameworks alone. Each misunderstanding carries value, contributing to a more equitable model of collaboration that evolves through practice. The project discussed in this paper adopts Participatory Practice Research as a strategy, combining Practice Research with Participatory Action Research, drawing on Metadesign, and the Capabilities Approach. Focusing on a collaboration between a designer working at Fashion4Freedom and a Vietnamese silversmith artisan, and with support from the Centre for Cultural Preservation and Economic Development, the paper offers a reflective account of navigating frictions, intentions, and consequences. It discusses the development of the 25% bonus payment structure as a tangible outcome that rebalances power and recognises value. Centring knowledge systems and cultural agency from the Global South, the paper explores how

designer–artisan collaborations can contribute to decolonising dominant fashion practice. This implies positioning the designer–researcher not as the authority defining cultural sustainability but as a collaborator accountable to artisans and cultural stewards. The insights offered in this paper may help others, such as designers, researchers, NGO and social enterprises, navigating ethical and cultural challenges in collaborative design, while future research could explore the adaptation of the bonus structure and emerging learnings across other cultural contexts.

Keywords: decolonising fashion; designer–artisan collaborations; craftsmanship; cultural sustainability; social innovation; Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Global fashion systems remain entrenched in colonised, industrialised structures that marginalise diverse forms of knowledge, practice, and making. These systems are built on extractive relationships with people and the planet, consistently devaluing modes of working outside dominant Western paradigms (Santos, 2014; Global Fashion Agenda, 2021; Gardetti, 2023). Despite growing attention to sustainability, mainstream practices continue to reproduce hierarchies of power between designers and makers, and the Global North and Global South (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2016; McCosker, 2023). Fast fashion's dependence on cheap labour in China, Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam deepens inequalities and exploits artisans and Indigenous communities (Gwilt, 2019). In Vietnam, colonial legacies are visible in the marginalisation of craft communities and the decline of heritage industries once central to Vietnamese identity. Rapid modernisation, industrialisation, and land conversion have led to the disappearance of many traditional crafts (Fanchette & Stedman, 2009; Murry, 2010; Reubens, 2013). Today artisans face occupational displacement, limited market access, and precarious livelihoods (UNIDO, 2013; Nguyen & Khong, 2013; Gentleman, 2019). Yet heritage craft remains a vital source of cultural and social resilience, with potential for inclusive, place-based development and for reshaping fashion around care, reciprocity, and interdependence (British Council, 2017; VICAS, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). Craft offers continuity but also a means to imagine regenerative, culturally grounded futures (UNIDO, 2013).

Framed through the lens of the designer-as-researcher, this paper draws on the first author's ongoing doctoral project, centred on a long-term collaboration with a silversmith artisan since 2014. Using Metadesign (Wood, 2022), the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999), and Participatory Practice Research (PPR), it examines how relational, co-developed practices can shift design from extractive to collaborative modes responsive to local knowledge, cultural identity, and community well-being. The study extends Metadesign into a non-Western craft context, operationalises the Capabilities Approach through situated capacity-building between designer and artisan, and contributes empirically to PPR by showing how collaboration, shared authorship, and mediated decision-making unfold in a culturally negotiated Vietnamese context.

The paper explores how long-term designer–artisan collaborations can contribute to decolonising fashion practice and advancing cultural sustainability.. In particular, the paper addresses the following research objectives:

I. To examine how moments of friction in designer-artisan collaborations became sites of unlearning and contribute to the emergence of new knowledge.
II. To analyse how cultural insiders (F4F and CPED) can facilitate more equitable, culturally grounded designer–artisan collaborations.
III. To articulate emerging practice-based learnings that may offer useful insights for designers, researchers, NGOs, and social enterprises working with artisans in similar contexts.

Vietnam as research context

Vietnam's rich craft heritage and complex colonial history provide a critical lens to explore how cultural sustainability can emerge from non-Western knowledge systems and relational practice. As both a major garment exporter and a country with craft traditions under threat, Vietnam embodies tensions between globalised fashion and local systems of making. Once a centre for luxury craftsmanship, its heritage industries were disrupted by colonialism, war, and rapid industrialisation (Fanchette & Stedman, 2009; Gough & Rigg, 2012). Today, Vietnamese artisans face declining markets, the loss of intergenerational transmission, and pressure from mass production (UNIDO, 2013; Gentleman, 2019). Yet, as British Council (2018) and VICAS (2018) show, craft continues to be a site of resilience, innovation, and community identity.

By centring Vietnamese knowledge systems and lived craft practices, this paper proposes that cultural sustainability and social innovation can be achieved through collaborative, place-based practice that regenerates fashion from the ground up. This approach stems from over a decade of the first author's situated practice in Vietnam with the social enterprise Fashion4Freedom (F4F) and the recently closed Centre for Cultural Preservation and Economic Development (CPED). Both organisations bridged Vietnamese artisans with fashion markets, developing culturally sustainable production systems rooted in local epistemologies. Through collaborations with artisans, F4F built participatory systems prioritising equitable exchange, transparency, and cultural continuity (F4F, 2025; CPED, 2025). The first author operated within a real-world ecosystem of artisans, NGOs, and social entrepreneurs, aligning with the evolving notion of the designer-as-researcher — one who learns through practice, reflexivity, and situated engagement (Findeli, 1998; Kaszynska *et al.*, 2022).

F4F developed and tested a model of design and manufacture that provides scalability and price competitiveness while preserving Vietnamese heritage crafts through a culturally sustainable, locally driven, transparent, and circular framework (Figure1).

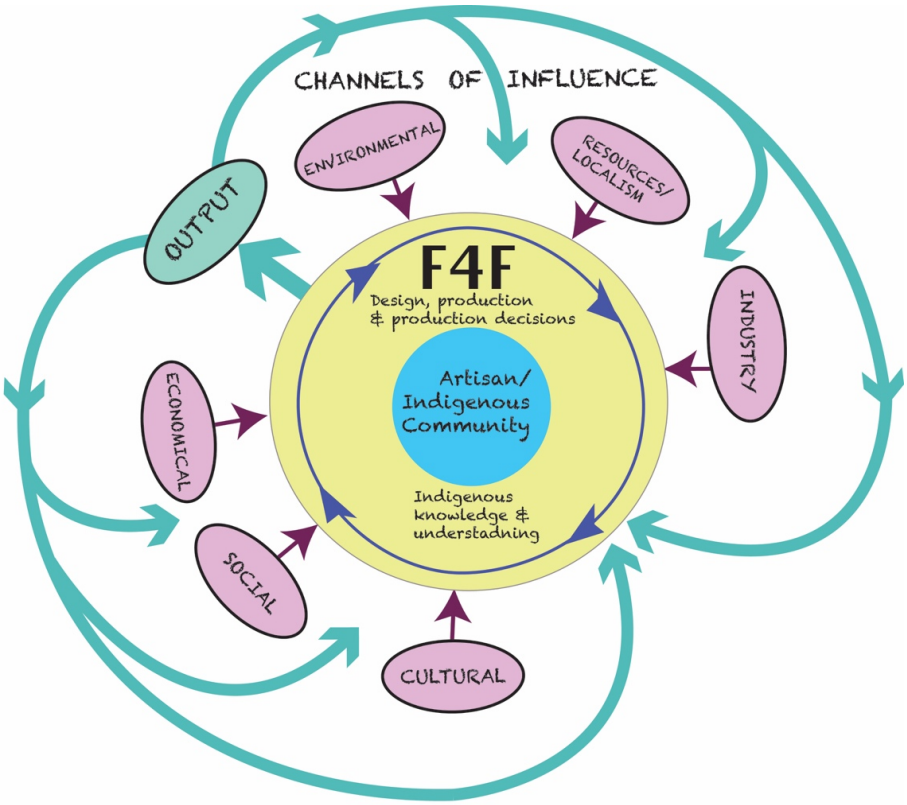

Figure1 F4F's culturally sustainable circular model. Source: First author

From 2011 to 2025, F4F operated through an AID + TRADE model leveraging philanthropic investment (Figure 2). CPED played a key mediating role within this ecosystem. Led by Co-founder and Chief Operating Director Lê Thị Châu Quỳnh, CPED worked closely with government bodies and ensured partnerships respected artisans' needs and traditions.

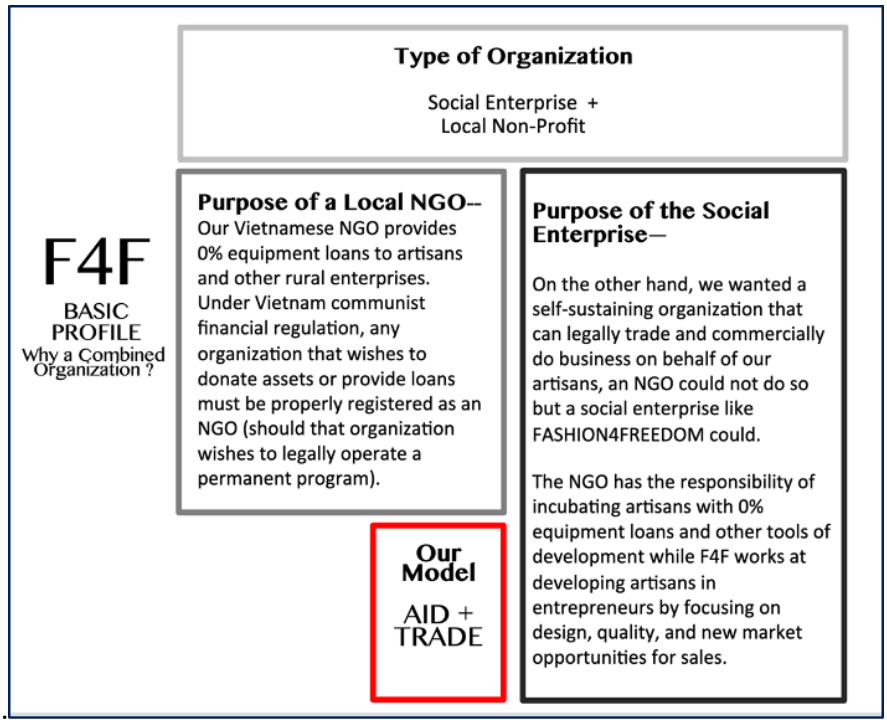

Figure 2. The AID + TRADE model for F4F and NGO CPED. Source: Fashion4Freedom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The fashion industry continues to rely on non-Western countries such as China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, India, and Cambodia as both a source of labour and inspiration (Murray, 2010; McCosker, 2023). Social injustice is deeply embedded in the fashion system (Global Fashion Agenda, 2021), which is built on colonialism (Gardetti et al., 2023) and racism (RCDF, 2025). Artisans and Indigenous producer communities from low- to middle-income economies are economically and socially disadvantaged (Scrase, 2003). This includes Vietnamese artisans and Indigenous peoples (Gentleman, 2019), many of whom can no longer sustain their livelihoods through their craft. Operating at the bottom of the fashion supply chain (Navas, 2019; Special Correspondent, 2025), artisans are routinely exploited

through cheap labour (Labour Behind the Label, 2022), cultural misappropriation (劭任 Shao Ren, 2018), human trafficking (Anti-Slavery International, 2025), and dangerous working conditions (Roberts-Islam, 2020; Butler & Begum, 2023).

Power Dynamics in Designer–Artisan Collaborations

Models of designer–artisan collaboration offer insights into how fashion might transition toward approaches that enrich both people and the planet (Brown, 2021). Yet the current system remains entrenched in colonial assumptions and Western prejudices (RCDF, 2025). Collaborations between Western-trained designers and artisans from marginalised cultures are therefore fraught with imbalance, shaped by enduring colonial legacies (Hamilton, 2021).

The Max Mara case in 2019 illustrates these dynamics. The brand was accused of misappropriating traditional motifs belonging to the Indigenous Oma tribe (Figure 3), located across northern Laos, north-west Vietnam, and southern China (Dick, 2019). The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC, 2025), a cultural steward in Laos, exposed the misappropriation. Indigenous cultural rights and intellectual property remain widely unprotected (Boța-Moisin et al., 2023; Cultural Intellectual Property Rights Initiative, 2025), enabling brands and designers to exploit non-Western artisans and Indigenous makers.

Figure 3. Max Mara designs misappropriate traditional designs of the Oma ethnic minority group. Image courtesy of Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC Laos), Oma Project, © 2019.

Even within collaborations between designers and artisans from the same non-Western countries, there are inherent power dynamics at play. Economic, political, cultural, and other pressures are all means used by designers to control and influence their collaborations. Mirza (2024) identifies both silent and active power signifiers that shape interactions, frequently in ways invisible to the designer. Ultimately, power mostly rests with the designer.

For instance, in 2019 H&M collaborated with Sabyasachi, a prominent Indian couture brand, launching its first saree with marketing emphasizing cultural authenticity to India (Anand, 2021). However, critics argued it exploited Indigenous people, as they received no compensation and did not produce any pieces. While Sabyasachi claimed well-meaning intentions to spotlight Indian design (*ibid.*), the collaboration misappropriated cultural heritage as a unique selling point for H&M and Sabyasachi. This three-way dynamic — H&M (the dominant Western system), Sabyasachi (the privileged designer), and Indigenous people — led to their cultural and economic exploitation.

In Vietnam, Biti faced controversy in 2021 after releasing a cultural shoe line promoted as Vietnamese brocade. The brocades had no connection to Vietnam and were sourced from China via Taobao, leading to accusations of cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, and theft (Bài, 2021). The design team was criticised for inadequate research, and Biti issued a formal apology for the unintentional exploitation.

Even within collaborations between designers and artisans from the same non-Western countries, there are inherent power dynamics at play. Economic, political, cultural, and other pressures are all means used by designers to control and influence their collaborations. There are silent and active power signifiers that shape collaborative processes. Ultimately, power mostly rests with the designer.

Cultural Sustainability and Indigenous Knowledge

Recognised as the fourth pillar of sustainability, cultural sustainability was defined by the World Commission on Culture and Development (1995) and expanded by UNESCO (2001) to include the “respect and protection of traditional knowledge, particularly that of Indigenous peoples.” Soini and Birkeland (2013) identify seven interlinked storylines —

heritage, vitality, diversity, locality, economic viability, eco-cultural resilience, and eco-cultural civilisation — all visible within Vietnam's craft ecosystems. Crafts rooted in intergenerational knowledge offer economic opportunity and resilience against global homogenisation. Within fashion, cultural sustainability emphasises safeguarding diverse traditions and ensuring equitable recognition of cultural contributors (Williams et al., 2022; Brown & Vacca, 2022; Boța-Moisin et al., 2023). Culture is positioned to address global inequities and support more sustainable development pathways (UNESCO, 2019). CIPRI (2025) further proposes cross-industry frameworks that combat cultural exploitation and empower cultural stewards as agents of change.

Ethical and Regenerative Collaboration Models

Design for social innovation reorients design away from market growth toward social needs (Manzini, 2015), supporting well-being, inclusion, and sustainable livelihoods. As a bottom-up, community-led process, it challenges dominant systems (Chick, 2012; Manzini, 2015) and aligns closely with designer–artisan collaborations that seek to address the impacts of globalisation. When applied to craft contexts, social innovation reframes fashion as relational and regenerative rather than industrial (Amadeu, 2016; Mazzarella, 2018). It positions design as a tool for mutual learning, reflection, and social change — prioritising equity, cultural agency, and shared authorship. Metadesign (Wood, 2022) supports complex, long-term models that require adaptability, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility, and shifts design away from Western individualist growth models toward co-evolutionary systems grounded in reciprocity (Wood, 2015).

Vuletich (2015) and Williams (2018) emphasise that designers must shift from problem-solvers to listeners, facilitators, and hosts. This requires both inner knowledge (self-awareness, humility) and outer knowledge (social, political, ecological systems). Designers must be reflexive, recognising embedded privilege and adopting an ethic of care, cultural sensitivity, and co-authorship alongside a decolonised lens (Mazzarella, 2025). Amadeu (2016) highlights the long-term, situated nature of these relationships, drawing on Sen's (1999) Capabilities Approach to emphasise capacity-building for both designers and artisans. Mirza (2024) adds further nuance by identifying how power signifiers can be mitigated through tools and reflective strategies embedded within practice.

Decolonising Fashion

Current research identifies a need to decolonise dominant design and fashion practices (Hamilton, 2021; Gardetti et al., 2023; RCDF, 2025). Bedford (2020) emphasises centring Indigenous knowledge to disrupt colonial systems, while Escobar (2018) argues that non-Western "worlds" (pluriverses) must be recognised as legitimate sites of design innovation. Tunstall's (2023) cultural justice framework challenges Eurocentric design values, and Smith (2012) and Santos (2014) contend that decolonising research requires centring Indigenous agency and transforming how knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated.

However, projects aimed at "preserving" craft often risk suppressing the very voices they intend to support, unintentionally perpetuating exploitation. Without new decolonising frameworks (Mazzarella, 2025), research and practice default to Western standpoints, reinforcing dominant and extractive models. Therefore, new models of designer–artisan collaboration must evolve outside the Global North's industrial systems and away from structures dominated by Western forms of knowledge.

Cultural sustainability is positioned as a relational, community-rooted practice grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, where safeguarding craft, empowering cultural insiders, and recognising diverse contributors are central to addressing global inequities. Social innovation emphasises that designers must step back, listen, and work through long-term, situated relationships shaped by local knowledge and outside of industrialised systems. However, designer–artisan collaborations are at risk of unintentionally perpetuating colonial legacies and extractive behaviours, even in projects framed as respectful or culturally grounded. There is a need for new models of collaboration to develop outside of Global North frameworks, yet few studies demonstrate how decolonial practice unfolds within real, sustained designer–artisan collaborations in this context. This gap frames the study, which traces long-term collaboration grounded in Vietnamese knowledge systems

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines a case study between a designer and a Vietnamese artisan to explore what can be learnt when a designer works within a non-Western system where colonial legacies and power imbalances are disrupted. Case studies allow detailed, real-world

analysis (Yin, 2018). This study focuses on a long-term collaboration between the first author and silversmith Lê Ngọc Trí, facilitated by F4F and CPED. Beginning in 2014 and unfolding through multiple rounds of practice research, the collaboration offered insight into how the designer's mindset and approach evolved over time, showing how learning is cumulative and embedded in practice.

In practice research (Kaszynska et al., 2022), practice functions as both method and means of knowledge production. This project employed Participatory Practice Research (PPR), combining Practice Research (PR) (Kaszynska et al., 2022) with Participatory Action Research (PAR) (McIntyre, 2008). This enabled iterative cycles of planning, collaborative action, and reflection between the designer, artisan, and mediating organisations. Knowledge emerged through lived engagement rather than detached observation, adopting an interdisciplinary and adaptive approach (Barrett & Bolt, 2019; Plowright, 2011).

Data was collected through a postmodern bricolage approach (Thomas, 2017), enabling flexibility and responsiveness to context. Methods included desk research, ethnographic observation during collaboration and production, and prototyping as a sense-making tool, supported by communication through a private Facebook group for documentation, translation, shared input, and feedback — ensuring transparency, accuracy, and mediated trust.

The collected data included spoken and written words, photographs, videos, and craft objects, organised in Excel sheets and tables. Following a flexible design approach (Robson & McCartan, 2016), analysis took place iteratively throughout the project. Thematic coding (ibid.) was conducted inductively, beginning with organising raw data and initial coding to identify emerging themes, patterns, and reflections. Codes were then compared and grouped across the dataset, allowing themes to surface and informing a thematic map. Interpretation involved comparing different parts of the data through tables, Excel sheets, and reflective writing.

Reflexive bracketing (Ahern, 1999) informed interpretation by requiring the first author to acknowledge that, as a white, Western-educated designer, their positionality shaped how data was understood. This included continually examining assumptions, beliefs, and expectations, and recognising how these could influence interpretation. Observer triangulation (Robson,

2002) was supported through ongoing dialogue with F4F and CPED, helping ensure the analysis remained culturally grounded.

FINDINGS

This section outlines key moments of collaboration between the first author and the silversmith, from 2015 to 2021, highlighting how frictions — from misaligned expectations to differing assumptions — generated the greatest learning and new ways of collaborating. A central outcome of this process was the creation of the 25% bonus structure, a tangible model for equitable designer-artisan collaborations.

Recognising misalignment as a site of learning

Early collaborations (2015-2018) exposed tensions between Western design processes and local craft systems. In 2015, the first author developed a jewellery design that proved unfeasible, from an economic and resource point of view, revealing how Western design-led approaches were detached from local realities. Reflection and dialogue with F4F's founder, LanVy Nguyen, marked a turning point: designs needed to be developed *with* the artisan, not *for* them. Revisiting the silversmith's archive led to the first collaborative piece, the Butterfly Cuff in 2016 (Figure 4), signalling a methodological shift toward an embedded, participatory practice. This shift directly informed how later designs were developed, with the first author moving away from pre-determined proposals toward co-developed forms led by the artisan's archive and material logic.

Figure 4. First author wearing the F4F gold and silver Khoi cuff in 2025 (left); the outcome of the first collaboration with the silversmith artisan in 2016: the Butterfly Cuff (right). Photos by the first author.

In the first round of practice research (2018–2019), the collaboration centred on the Butterflies & Grenades ear cuff (Figure 5). While the silversmith's craftsmanship was excellent, the design intent had shifted from what the first author envisioned. The sample did not meet the first authors' expectations; its grenade components were produced flat instead of rounded. Previously, the first author might have requested revisions at the artisan's or shared expense. This time, they recognised their own perspective was most likely flawed, even if the reason was not yet clear. Rather than dismissing the outcome, the first author viewed it as reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983), and that the grenade represented the artisan's authorship and agency. This revealed the importance of centring Global South knowledge systems, where artisan-led decisions make designs relational. Misalignments were now understood as productive sites of learning that challenge Western expectations of precision or control. This shaped all subsequent rounds of development, prompting the first author to treat unexpected variations as moments of unlearning and re-learning rather than errors.

Figure 5. Tri in his studio and the “Butterflies and Grenade” ear cuff, made from upcycled silver using traditional Vietnamese silversmithing techniques. Photos by Fashion4Freedom.

In the second round (2019–2020), centred on the Beautiful P neckpiece (Figures 6–7), financial misalignments surfaced when the final cost exceeded the quotation by 20%. Discussions with Nguyen revealed that artisans often under-quote based on global expectations of speed and low cost. This moment reframed misalignment as revelation — exposing structural inequities and leading to the creation of the 25% bonus structure to help manage future misalignments. This became a core operational tool in the next phase, shifting the first author’s understanding of, and approach to, costings.

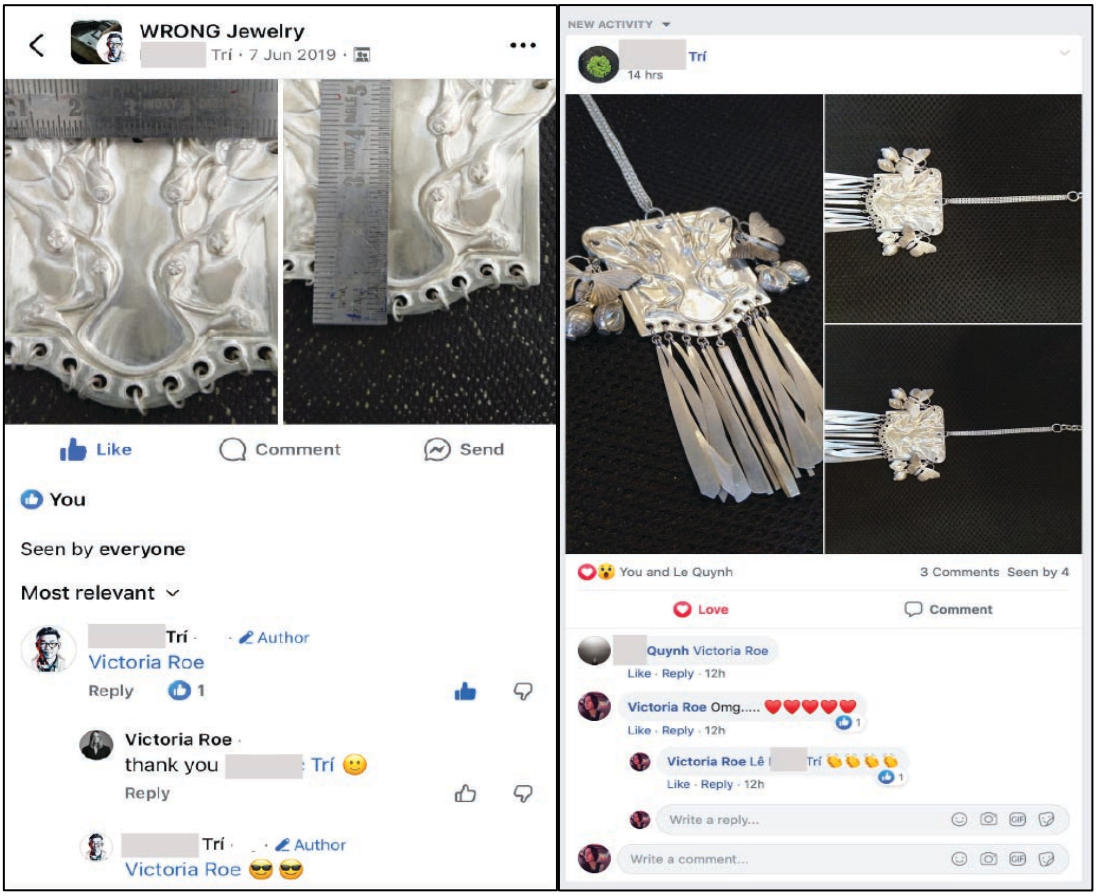

Figure 6 Image capturing online collaboration via a private Facebook group, where respect and care played a central role. Photos by Fashion4Freedom.

Figure 7. Beautiful P Neckpiece made from upcycled silver using traditional Vietnamese silversmithing techniques. Photos by Fashion4Freedom.

Anticipating Friction and Embedding Equity

In the third round (2020-2021), the development of the Balls & Chain neckpiece (Figure 8), tested this new model in practice. The inclusion of the 25% bonus, without the artisan's knowledge, from the outset helped take pressure off the collaboration, and mange any frictions that arose from misaligned understanding and expectations. However, persistent differences in interpretation re-emerged.

Figure 8 Balls & Chain made in 2021 using upcycled silver reclaimed from old technology adopting traditional Vietnamese silversmithing techniques. Photos by Fashion4Freedom.

Misalignments and Differences

Despite providing photos and detailed information (Figure 9), in the first sample, the silversmith read some of them differently — particularly the 3D shaping of a section. On reflection, the designer recognised that this interpretation gap stemmed not from error but from divergent lenses. Her own understanding had been shaped by research, design intent, and Western training, while the artisan was informed by lived experience, material intuition, and cultural context. The designer assumed the three-dimensional quality of the lock would be self-evident. Even when information appears clear within Western design systems, perception is filtered through culture, language, and experience. The communication breakdowns were not technical errors but reflections of differing visual literacies and cultural contexts. This realisation shaped the designer's following communication, leading to layered instructions, that were co-reviewed with CPED before the next sampling.

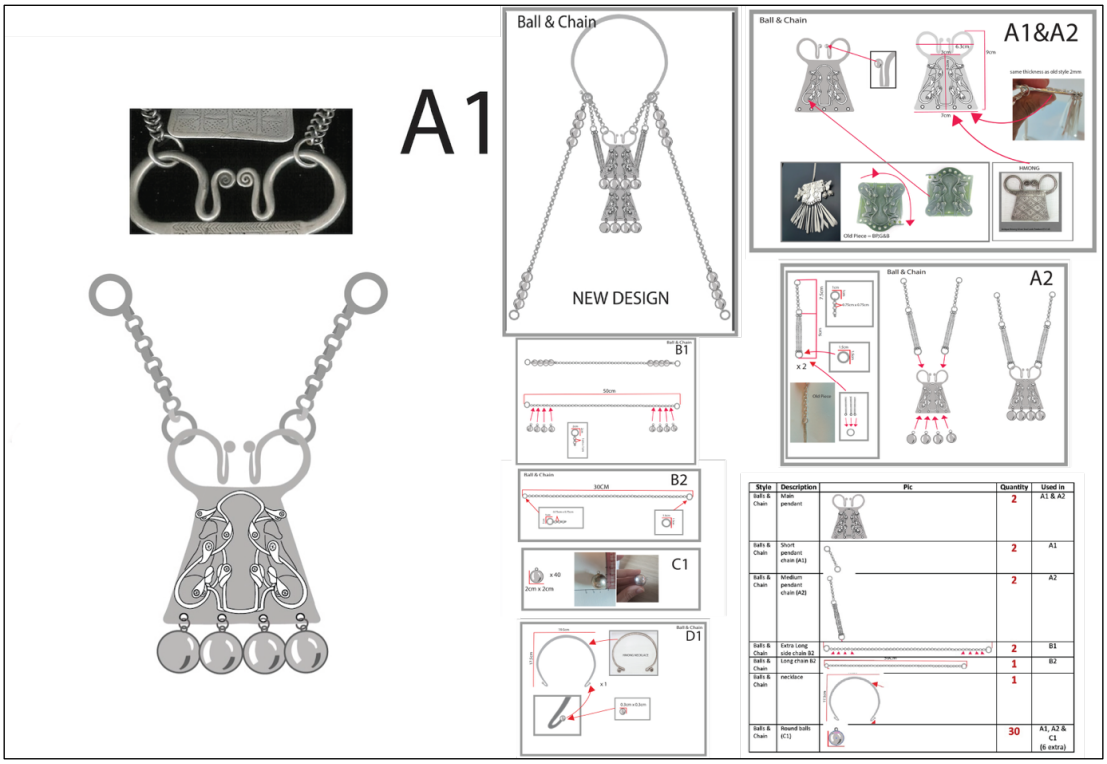

Figure 9. Technical design information for the Balls & Chain. The left images show the design the first author assumed Tri would interpret with its 3D element. Images by the first author.

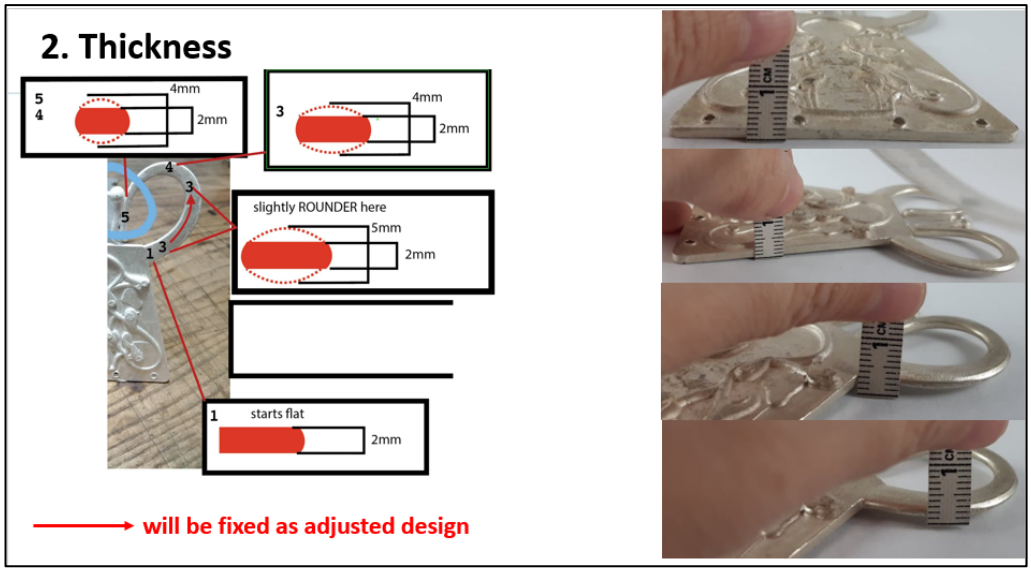

Figure 10. Technical information and online collaboration to manage misalignment. Images by the first author.

The first author also observed similar tensions with external designers approaching F4F — designers often expected quick, inexpensive samples and were frustrated by requests for clarification. These recurring issues reflected systemic misconceptions about artisanal production and showed how unintentional exploitation arises when responsibility for understanding is placed on the artisan. Long-term immersion helped the first author recognise how industrialised cues reinforce hierarchical structures and obstruct genuine collaboration.

Reframing Economic and Systemic Structures

Anticipating moments of friction, the designer included a hidden 25% bonus in the payment plan, ensuring that misalignment did not translate into frustration. This mechanism contributed to formalising equity, acknowledging time, expertise, and refinement as central to cultural and economic sustainability. This approach stood in contrast to other designers working through F4F. Observing these interactions, the first author's understanding shifted — recognising that design is always subject to differing readings, and that misalignment should not be placed solely on the artisan. Instances of resistance toward F4F's pricing structure also highlighted broader misalignment on time and sampling costs, due to collaborations needing to navigate complex misalignments. The first author recognised how easily unintentional exploitation can arise. Without long-term immersion, they would have viewed price changes or unexpected results as artisan's errors rather than symptoms of misalignment. This responsibility for clarity, fairness, and understanding rests with the designer. These experiences revealed how "standard" Western design methods, presumed universal, often fail in intercultural contexts. As a result, the designer formally integrated slower timelines, iterative sampling, and shared decision-making into all subsequent collaborations. Misunderstandings were not incompetence but a sign of the limits of visual universality. The 25% bonus and comprehensive 3D technical specifications were adopted for all future collaborations with artisans and Indigenous communities.

Emerging Learnings on Designer-Artisan Collaborations

The collaboration with the silversmith provided a lens to demonstrate the evolving role of the designer–researcher and how learning developed through mistakes, friction, reflection, and adaptation over time. Several interconnected insights emerged that may also be relevant for other designer–artisan partnerships:

- **Knowledge through friction:** Misalignment and misunderstanding became generative moments where difference created innovation.
- **Process driven by artisan's knowledge:** Expertise in materials, processes, and context shaped design, production and economic decisions, grounding practice in Vietnamese systems of knowledge.
- **Shared authorship:** Artisan's agency redefined design as a relational process rather than individual authorship.
- **Economic fairness as ethics:** The bonus structure functioned as a decolonial tool for valuing time, skill, and cultural contribution, while allowing the collaboration to navigate misaligned expectations and understandings.
- **Knowledge Misalignments:** Misunderstanding between Western processes and non-Western knowledge places designer-artisan partnerships at risk of unintentional exploitation or derailing the collaboration all together.
- **Reflexive transformation:** The longitudinal immersion facilitated a gradual unlearning of hierarchical design behaviours and a shift toward humility, empathy, and accountability.
- **Contextual adaptability:** The designer's process evolved to align with local systems, rhythms, and materials rather than imposing fixed Western modes of production.
- **Role of cultural stewards:** The local NGO acted as a cultural stewards, helping frictions and misaligned expectations and understanding.

The case study discussed in this paper demonstrates that decolonising designer-artisan collaborative practice cannot be achieved through theoretical frameworks alone. It requires long-term, situated engagement where friction becomes a generative force for ethical and cultural renewal. Each moment of misunderstanding carries value, collectively moving towards a more equitable model of collaboration that continues to evolve through ongoing practice.

DISCUSSION

Literature highlights that, while fashion urgently needs to be decolonised, research and practice still default to Western standpoints that reinforce dominant and exploitative modes of collaboration (Mazzarella, 2025; Smith, 2012). The silversmith case study builds

upon this by tracing key learnings that evolved outside dominant industrial fashion systems and within a non-Western structure (Vietnam), reflecting a need identified by Bedford (2020), Tunstall (2023), and Escobar (2018). F4F and CPED's roles—aligned with CIPRI's (2025) framing of cultural insiders as "agents of change"— grounded decisions in local epistemologies and safeguarded cultural practice. This positions the study as a Global South–led contribution showing how decolonial practice unfolds through long-term, situated collaboration rather than theory alone.

The findings show a new understanding of friction in designer–artisan collaborations. Misalignments between industrialised design systems and non-Western craft knowledge placed the collaboration at risk of unintentional exploitation, reflecting Mirza's (2024) observation that silent and active power signifiers often shape such encounters. While the literature calls for shifts in practice, it rarely shows how these dynamics unfold in real time. This study provides a lived account of misalignment as a productive site of learning and demonstrates that decolonising practice cannot rely solely on designer reflexivity. It requires culturally grounded mediation, where cultural stewards help navigate power imbalances and expose the limits of Western assumptions—supporting calls for relational, context-specific approaches (Mazzarella, 2025; Brown & Vacca, 2022).

A central contribution lies in demonstrating how long-term immersion within a non-Western system enables reflexive unlearning. Over eight years, the first author gradually shifted away from hierarchical design behaviours toward humility, empathy, and accountability. This echoes Mazzarella's (2025) emphasis on inner knowledge (care, reflexivity), Tunstall's (2023) cultural justice framework, and Williams' (2018) understanding of fashion as a social practice rooted in people and place. These understandings emerged slowly through friction and repair, shaping more equitable and culturally sensitive ways of working. This aligns with Amadeu (2016) and Sen's (1999) Capabilities Approach, highlighting how capacity-building and co-creation emerge through sustained, situated relationships.

Further insights emerged when artisans introduced unexpected design variations, illustrating what Soini & Birkeland (2013) describe as cultural vitality and diversity. These moments demonstrated in practice that craft is a living system evolving through making and place (Walker et al., 2018; Brown & Vacca, 2022). This directly reflects Mazzarella's (2018) framing of collaboration as embodied and situated, and echoes Amadeu (2016) and Manzini's (2015) emphasis on shared processes rather than designer control. Mirza (2024) and Tunstall

(2023) argue that authorship must be shared and non-Western agency fully recognised; here, the artisan-led variations made this visible within the collaboration. These differences challenged Western expectations of replication and authorship and highlighted craft's adaptive resilience.

The case also shows how easily collaborations can reproduce the dynamics they aim to challenge when Western design habits go unexamined. By tracing misalignments, friction, and the author's gradual unlearning, the study offers a grounded account of how these patterns manifest and how they can be recognised and interrupted. It illustrates how shifting from directing to listening and co-authoring (Vuletich, 2015; Williams, 2018) can take shape, and how subtle power dynamics identified by Mirza (2024) can be mediated rather than ignored. The findings show that clearer guidance must emerge through situated practice where non-Western knowledge drives decision-making.

Within this study, the development of the 25% bonus structure aligns with wider decolonial arguments advocating Indigenous-centred approaches to fashion (Bedford, 2020; Santos, 2014; Tunstall, 2023). It offers a situated case that shows how such frameworks unfold in lived collaborative practice. The bonus structure reflects Soini and Birkeland's (2013) emphasis on economic viability, cultural vitality, diversity, and locality, and responds to Smith's (2012) and Santos' (2014) argument that decolonisation requires transforming how knowledge is produced and validated. Here, the bonus structure recognises the artisan's interpretive labour as equal to the designer's—a decolonial tool embedded in practice rather than theory.

Across these insights, the study offers three key contributions to the field:
(1) reframing friction as a generative mechanism for unlearning and learning;
(2) presenting the 25% bonus structure as a payment-based artefact of decolonial practice that redistributes value; and
(3) proposing a shift from designer-led correction to co-evolution, where decision-making is shared, culturally mediated, and grounded in local epistemologies.

Together, these findings suggest an emergent relational framework for designer–artisan collaboration grounded in:
(1) shared authorship rather than designer control;
(2) culturally mediated decision-making supported by cultural insiders;

(3) economic equity mechanisms (e.g., the bonus structure) acknowledging interpretive and relational labour; and
(4) long-term situated engagement as a condition for meaningful unlearning and co-evolution.

While still emerging, the framework offers early insight into how decolonial designer–artisan collaborations may be operationalised in practice. It foregrounds a decolonial approach to cultural sustainability and social innovation and offers the field concrete insight into how decolonial design can unfold through long-term, embedded collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Through a case study with a Vietnamese silversmith, this paper shows that new forms of designer–artisan collaboration — capable of contributing to the decolonisation of fashion practice — must develop outside dominant Western structures. Even with good intentions, designers often reproduce aspects of the very systems they seek to challenge. Unlearning embedded colonial legacies and navigating power imbalances is a slow, relational process requiring humility, accountability, and a willingness to listen, reflect, and repair.

Here, long-term, situated collaboration became a site of both production and unlearning, essential for regenerating fashion systems grounded in equity, care, and cultural understanding. The bonus payment structure offers one example of a practical, decolonial tool that rebalances power and supports more equitable collaboration. The study also highlights the critical role of cultural insiders, whose mediation can help manage colonial legacies and power dynamics.

While this study does not propose a complete framework, it represents a provisional moment within an evolving body of practice research. Its contribution lies in demonstrating how cultural sustainability emerges not through theory alone but through lived, long-term engagement. Meaningful transformation requires sustained commitment and the courage to unlearn — recognising that renewal is an ongoing process of becoming.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Work

This study offers one situated account of a designer–artisan collaboration, and its findings are shaped by the specific people, place, and systems involved. While reflexivity informed the

process, the first author's embedded position will have interpretive bias, and nuances of translation and mediated communication may have influenced understandings. As such, the insights are not intended to be generalised.

Future research could explore comparative or multi-sited collaborations to examine whether similar patterns of friction, unlearning, and cultural mediation emerge elsewhere — addressing the gap identified in the literature regarding the absence of research showing how decolonial practice unfolds within long-term, real-world designer–artisan collaborations, grounded in non-Western knowledge systems.

Next steps in the wider doctoral project include developing a practical guide for designers, NGOs, and social enterprises working with non-Western artisans. Further work will also consider how these insights can inform design education, challenging dominant Western assumptions and strengthening approaches that position the Global South as a site of knowledge, innovation, and renewal.

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