



**THE HAPPY WEAVER**  
*"Success for me isn't about having a lot of money. It's about providing for my family what they need. Having enough ... that is success,"* says Agustina Quitarlano. Smiling, she recalls how much she accomplished with her loom weaving that has been providing for her family, helping fellow mothers, and saving a cultural heritage.



## The Heroic Business of Saving Ilocos Sur's Cultural Heritage

Ilocos Sur Loom Weavers Association (ISLA)

*A mother who learned loom weaving before the age of 12 tried to save this tradition from vanishing. As her reward, she ended up having it as the core of a thriving business.*

- THE INTRICATE PROCESS OF ABEL WEAVING**
1. It starts with *starching* or dyeing the thread.
  2. *Spooling* the thread into bamboo spools follows.
  3. Next is *warping* to combine the colors of thread according to the guide of the pattern, and *beaming* or putting the threads into the wooden loom frame.
  4. *Actual weaving* depends on the type of handloom to be used—headling, reeding, or weft winding.



**H**orrified at the prospect of losing an industry that she grew up with, Agustina Quitarino tried to salvage every discarded loom she could find.

The looms were once popular for weaving cotton yarns into *abel fabric*—the pride and iconic symbol of Ilocos Sur since the Galleon Trade, when the quality and designs of its products almost spun Spain's own weaving industry out of existence.

The Ilocano weavers then were using the *Gossypium barbadense*, the extra-long staple and the finest cotton variety similar to that in the United States. *Gossypium barbadense* accounts for only eight percent of the total global cotton production.

However, the time came when the skilled labor for traditional weaving dwindled, leaving only a few in Vigan to carry on this centuries-old industry.

Moreover, the local supply of cotton yarn could not be depended upon. The Philippines has been a net importer of cotton since 1960, with imports rising by as much as 63.89 percent in 2014.

Undaunted, Agustina started with the two wooden looms that she had found, but she had to deal with a lack of space. "[The loom] is a big contraption. Where would I put these looms?"

Unfortunately, she lacked, not only space, but also the money for the raw materials and the compensation for the people to run the looms.

By stroke of serendipity came the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) reaching out to her with every trick in the book to make her business hit the ground running.

"[DTI] even helped us by recommending financial institutions."

In no time at all, Agustina's business got off to a good start and grew through the years as she attended one DTI training seminar after another. The DTI's marketing division has also contributed a lot in making the *abel fabric* become a must-have souvenir item of the province.

The *abel fabric*s are customarily sold at the Vigan public market and by the shops along Crisologo Street where local and foreign tourists buy souvenir items.

Today, Agustina has 32 women employed. Some are based in the production house, and the others work in their respective homes.

"If [the mothers] have extra room for the loom, then they can do it at home," she says. "They can put the looms in their houses and take breaks to cook, clean, and take care of their children," Agustina explains.

Agustina has also partnered with the Department of Labor and Employment for its special program for the employment of students. The program has enabled her to hire high school students during their summer vacation, making them earn income while learning the craft.

"My husband did not make a lot and we just wanted our children to have a good future. That was how I started. I wanted to get into weaving because I've known it all my life," Agustina recalls.

True enough, all of her five children have finished school as she weaved her way to success, but it was not all that she has accomplished. She has guided others along the same path while helping save an industry and a cultural heritage.



**DID YOU KNOW?** During the Spanish colonization of the Philippines, the Manila Galleons sailed the Pacific with *inabel* sailcloth woven by *Ilocanas*.



**THE ILOCANA LOOM WEAVERS**  
These women are all smiles as they go about the intricate process of loom weaving. Weavers must master synchronizing the movements of their hands and feet to properly use the wooden handloom. They make sure that the tradition of *abel* weaving is passed on for future generations by teaching and honing the young ones to love this beautiful and creative craft.



### TIPS FROM THE LOOM

CREATIVITY  
HARD WORK  
CALAMITY  
PREPAREDNESS  
LOVE + PASSION

### HOW DTI HELPED

Under DTI's *Shared Service Facilities (SSF)* project, Agustina was able to get financial assistance and to avail trainings and seminars for product design development and business management.