

Rise of ‘The Gift Hutt’

Fiji Regional

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Sukhia Tuimaleali’ifano Go’s story was one of the motivating stories heard by the participants of the second Pacific Women in Business Conference held in November 2014 in Nadi. The Conference was organized by the [Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation](#) (PIPSO) and supported by Pacific Women. It brought together around 187 women business leaders from 13 Pacific Islands Countries.

Sukhia (or Khia, as she’s known by her friends and family) is the founder and managing director of a successful Fiji-based online company specializing in the art of Elei (pronounced e-lay) – an ancient form of woodblock printing that is still widely practiced in Samoa today. While the art form originates from Samoa, [The Gift Hutt](#) individually hand-blocks the fabrics in Fiji.

“Producing Elei is not only an extension of my team and my identity,” says Sukhia, of Samoan-Fijian descent, “it is also an opportunity for us to share our culture and traditions with the rest of the world.”

Sukhia and The Gift Hutt’s story started two years ago when she was made redundant.

“After working with a bank for five years, at the age of 28, having just bought a house with my husband and looking forward to sending our young son to school the following year, I lost my job in 2012. It was a challenging time, but I looked at it positively and saw that it gave my mum and I an opportunity to go pursue a business idea that we’d had for a very long time.”

Motivation, ideas and a vision came after she was encouraged by a good friend (Ronna Pastorizo-Sekiguchi, also a successful entrepreneur and owner of The Greenhouse Studio) to attend PIPSO’s first Pacific Women in Business Conference in 2012.

Describing the pivotal moment: “I was in awe when I heard the stories business women from around the region shared with us – they were all so amazing and inspiring. I thought to myself – if they can do it, so can I!”

This followed a series of product testing but it was a conversation with an aunt and cousin in Samoa (“both strong business women”), followed by their first research trip in March 2013 that convinced Sukhia and her mother that creating fabrics using Elei was something that was special for them and something they wanted to venture into.

After successfully securing financial assistance from PIPSO’s Business Development Fund (established to assist micro, small and medium enterprises of the Forum Island Countries) The Gift Hutt team undertook two capacity building trainings – including skills training and a thorough orientation training which took the team through the key business ideas, The Gift Hutt’s visions, mission, values and other personal goal setting initiatives.

“If we were to operate efficiently as a business, we needed to live, breath and speak the same language. It was also important for us to motivate the team to set personal goals because we wanted the team to know that in contributing to the business’s success, they were contributing to theirs as well.”

Business opportunities came to Sukhia and the team soon after local production commenced – something that she and the team are very grateful for.

“Before we had even started printing fabrics, we received orders from two corporate houses for uniforms! We hadn’t done that product line before but we took it as a challenge. We were very grateful to the University of the South Pacific and Merchant Finance for that.”

In the last two years, The Gift Hutt has developed an assortment of product lines including a line of resort wear, which they were approached to supply to a five-star resort in Savusavu as well as to the two biggest retail outlets in Fiji – MHCC and Tappoos. In April 2014, they attended their first trade show – Trade Pasifika – through PIPSO, and in the following couple of months, through networks formed at the Pacific Women in Business Conference, officially started exporting to buyers in Papua New Guinea and Japan.

In 2014, a first for the team, The Gift Hutt won the Fiji Development Bank’s Small Business Award in the Wholesale & Retail category.

From the first Conference in 2012 to the recent one in 2014, The Gift Hutt team has continued to rise from strength to strength and Sukhia attributes the achievement of these milestones to many people.

“Firstly to PIPSO and all the women at the Conference who shared their stories of doing business in the Pacific. I continue to learn a lot from them. Also my sisters at the Women Entrepreneurs Business Council – I thank them for sharing knowledge with me and supporting me. I am not sure what I’d do without them. The awesome team at the Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation who are always on standby for the many, many business questions that we had. Most importantly – to my family and awesome team – none of this would have been possible without their love and support, they really are the driving force behind everything that has come out of The Gift Hutt.”

Sukhia strongly advocated for the formulation of local mentoring programmes to assist businesses like hers in helping micro, small and medium enterprises understand the ins and outs of business, especially in the initial stages.

“We did have challenges in the two years in dealing with issues like exporting, tariffs and freight-forwarding, and we always reached out to subject-matter experts. It took a lot of time to get access to information that we needed to move forward. If there was a local mentoring programme that could help us understand how to get this information quicker, it’d make starting up a small business a little easier” she said.

Visit The Gift Hutt’s [website](#) for more information on their work.

The second Pacific Women in Business Conference was successfully organized by the [Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation](#) at the Sheraton Fiji Resort Nadi. With the theme Building Women Entrepreneurs – Building Nations, the Conference brought together around 187 women business leaders from 13 Pacific Islands Countries and featured over 40 inspiring regional speakers who shared stories about their journey in business. The three-day conference also featured parallel workshop sessions on marketing, financing, export opportunities, training and networking, growth strategies and product development.

The Australian Government, through its Pacific Women initiative, provided significant financial support towards the event, with Westpac as the official private sector gold sponsor. Other conference supporters include Mai Life Magazine, the Greenhouse Studio, Kriz Corp and DJ Works Fiji.