

Esther Suti, a visionary leader

Regional Solomon Islands

SHARE

January 28, 2015

In 2008, Esther Suti in her own words, “broke tradition” and became Gizo Town’s first woman taxi driver. Gizo is located in the Western Province of Solomon Islands.

An achievement in itself for most people, but not for Esther. She is a pioneer with a list of visionary initiatives to her credit.

Originally from Simbo, Esther is a passionate advocate for women’s rights and the rights of persons with disability. This passion has motivated her to undertake a myriad of enterprises for the good of others.

“In Gizo Town I witnessed how women were selling food at the market day and night, spending sleepless and uncomfortable nights at the market. Drunk men used to harass and abuse the women vendors. Year after year, we women and children faced these issues without anyone addressing it. This created an uncertain future for us.”

Esther decided to take matters into her own hands. She started selling food items such as ice-blocks, lollies, lemon juice, chocolate and banana cakes, and saved the money she made from the sales. Through this she was able to build a house and buy a taxi.

“In 2007 I shared my story with a woman called Onex Paekera and we decided to save money together. The following year, eight other women joined us. After five months, we had saved a substantial amount of money and decided to transfer from one main account to our individual accounts. The women used the savings to invest in their own businesses. The ten of us business women now successfully operate businesses ranging from small retail shops, mobile top-ups, tailoring, taxi and accommodation services. One of us used the money to travel overseas.”

Esther’s motto of think big, start small was a huge success. Last year the financial membership of the savings scheme went from 10 to 300 members

and became the first project of the Gizo Women in Business Development, founded by Esther.

“Women have the potential to be self-sufficient and independent. They should be supported to utilize their skills and talents without relying on politicians to get money and free-handouts.”

Among her other initiatives and the one that received the most heartfelt response at the second Pacific Women in Business Conference in November 2014 where Esther shared her story, was her work with persons with disability. After seeing her deaf son go through the challenges of getting an education, Esther founded the first school for the deaf in the Western Province.

She said simply in response to the applause: “All children deserve an education”.

Esther has also been instrumental in establishing and leading the Simbo for Change initiative on her island. In collaboration with [Samoa Women in Business Development Inc.](#) and with funding and other support from the Australian Government’s [Pacific Leadership Program](#), Simbo’s women, tribal leaders and other community members are currently piloting a program that aims to link the island with viable export markets. Through organic certification, establishing infrastructure for production of goods (such as virgin coconut oil and cocoa), introducing farmers to established export markets, and working with male tribal and church leaders to analyse and reframe gender roles and relations, the pilot aims to create safer, more sustainable livelihoods and improved quality of life for women, girls and others in remote island communities.

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.