

## The Drawing Room

# SisterWorks helping migrant women in business

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**IMAGE:** [SISTERWORKS MEMBERS SELLING THEIR WARES \(SUPPLIED\)](#)

*When Luz Restrepo arrived in Australia as a political refugee from Colombia five years ago, she spoke no English. Today she's the CEO of SisterWorks, a social enterprise she founded dedicated to teaching business skills to refugee and migrant women.*

Despite being a GP and having three degrees under her belt, Luz Restrepo had little chance of finding work when she arrived in Australia—she didn't speak English.

Feeling isolated, frightened and disempowered, Restrepo says she knew she had to take positive action or she might have tried to kill herself.

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### **LUZ RESTREPO**

'When you come to a place where you don't speak the language, you don't know anyone, you don't know how to deal in the new culture, you feel like you are nobody.'

'It's incredible how the language stamps your life. The majority of the migrant and refugee people in Australia speak and listen very well but they can't read. There are no opportunities for them.'

She began taking free English classes and realised there were many other women going through the same challenges.

'I understood that it's more easy if all together we move and look for opportunities and how to pay our bills in our new home.'

She encouraged the women to join her in making and selling crafts. Not long afterwards, [SisterWorks](#) was born.

A committee of volunteers with legal, fundraising, marketing and administrative skills joined Restrepo to support the project. Today it's a grass roots social enterprise, with Restrepo as the executive officer and chief spokesperson.

While teaching valuable craft and enterprise skills, SisterWorks also offers participants an opportunity to make important social connections.

'When they learn how to make craft with volunteers who have skills they improve their English, connect with Australian people, because at the end it's to get Australian friends,' says Restrepo.



**IMAGE: LUZ AND THE SISTERWORKS GROUP (SUPPLIED)**

SisterWorks aims to help the most vulnerable: asylum seeker, refugee and migrant women. Many live in cultural enclaves and are dependent on men for income. Others experience domestic and social violence.

Restrepo says the connections women make at SisterWorks give them confidence to change their situation and help them to understand that they have rights and support.

Yassah Zarwue, a SisterWorks entrepreneur originally from Liberia, says her time with the group has given her both confidence and friends.

'I always say it's good to be part of this society because the Australians, they opened arms to us and helping us to more improve.'

She says that SisterWorks also helped her adjust culturally.

'Back home in our country we have different ideas, and the western society is different ideas. I started doing business at the age of 12, but our business is quite different, now I feel more confident and more inclusive.'

She says that most participants just want to be independent, pay tax and give back to Australia.

SisterWorks wouldn't exist without the help of volunteers and operates entirely on money raised through the fundraising efforts of the women.

Restrepo says that she hopes their success will provide a model to women who want to start similar groups around Australia.

'We need people who take the risks. To enable disadvantaged groups. A good way is to start their own businesses. So we're developing a model to sell that.'

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