

# SisterWorks: From refugees to sisters doing it for themselves

By Cara Waters

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Before Alia Sultana came to Australia she rarely left the house.

"I didn't go out in Pakistan," she says. "In Australia for the first time my husband said 'Now you can go. Whatever you want you can do it.' When your husband gives you permission to go out it's a big shock. Now he's more confident and I'm more confident about what I can do as a woman. In Pakistan I was a housewife and I cooked, cleaned and cared for children but here I am confident I can earn money."



Alia Sultana is a refugee who runs a catering company and helped set up SisterWorks, which provides advice and assistance to refugee women who wish to become entrepreneurs.

*Photo: Paul Jeffers*

Sultana helped found social enterprise SisterWorks, which assists women who are immigrants, refugee and asylum seekers to start their own businesses.

It's a big change for Sultana who is a member of the persecuted Hazara ethnic group and fled Pakistan with her husband after their daughter came to Australia as an international student.



Sonya Davies, Philip Dalidakis and Alia Sultana at the launch of the Victorian Small Business Festival.  
*Photo: Supplied*

She arrived in Australia in 2011 unable to speak English, but met other women at language classes run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and was part of the original group of women who decided to set up SisterWorks.

The social enterprise is headed by Luz Restrepo, a political refugee from Colombia, and works to help some of the most marginalised women in Australia by assisting them with business skills and administration.

"SisterWorks is like a home for all the women," Sultana says. "We are 55 nationalities in SisterWorks but we live like family members, like sisters we share our problems, our successes, our stories and our skills."

Off the back of SisterWorks Sultana has also set up her own catering business.



Tsering Wangmo, Petronia Nzirubusa, Luz Restrepo and Lhakpa Chodon at the SisterWorks stall at St Kilda market.  
*Photo: Chris Hopkins*

"Two years ago there was a fundraising event at SisterWorks and I did my first event and people liked it very much so from there I started my own business," she says. "I do catering for different organisations. SisterWorks helped me to start my business, to get licences and get food handling certificates, insurance, all the documentation which I didn't know [about] SisterWorks help me and teach me where to go."

SisterWorks board member Sonya Davies says the SisterWorks program started with participants making craft, which they were struggling to sell, available at markets .

"SisterWorks grew as volunteer artisans came to work with [the women] and work with their natural skills and develop those skills into very saleable items," she says. "They might knit a doll and it doesn't sell, but if an artisan volunteer helps you make an artisan bonnet and shoes they run out the door."

SisterWorks offers a craft and food program and [after a successful crowd-funding campaign in 2015](#) the social enterprise now has a permanent home in Richmond where around 80 women participate in programs helping them develop and market businesses.

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Alia Sultana

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SisterWorks takes 50 per cent of profits from women in the SisterWorks program, while the women retain the other half.

"SisterWorks takes the women, understands what they need and provides the resources to lift their confidence, lift their skills and lift their enthusiasm," Davies says. "Often these women come from very difficult circumstances but SisterWorks does not look upon those difficulties it looks on the opportunities that these women bring for themselves and for the Australian community because we promote them establishing a business. It's about the women using these skills to make money to be financially independent, it's not about giving them a handout."

Davies says her experiences as a female entrepreneur establishing and running a spa in Indonesia inspired her to join SisterWorks.

"In Indonesia I am working in a country where I don't understand the legislation or the environment, I have 40 employees where English isn't their first language. I understand how difficult it is to be the outsider."

SisterWorks has been recognised as one of the faces of [Victoria's small business festival](#), which is running this month.

The Victorian Minister for Small Business, Innovation and Trade Philip Dalidakis says the government is proud to be supporting such a worthwhile business.

"Small businesses offer huge economic benefits to Victoria, but SisterWorks proves that it's not just economic benefits they create, but social benefits as well," he says. "Victoria is proud of its famously multicultural society and SisterWorks offers immigrants,

refugees and asylum seekers the chance to become financially stable and independent. The SisterWorks business model also offers women who are new to our state a sense of belonging and a sense of pride."

Sultana says this pride drives the SisterWorks program.

"I do feel proud actually," she says. "I am able to learn for my family. I feel empowered myself with the help of SisterWorks."



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