

**Guardian sustainable business**  
Social entrepreneurs

## **Craft and community: the Australian women helping refugees into work**

Women are increasingly drawn to setting up social enterprises, especially those that solve local issues and help to get refugees and migrants into work

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Melbourne social enterprise the Sorghum Sisters trains refugees to work in the hospitality industry. Photograph: Sorghum Sisters

**When** Luz Restrepo looked around the classroom, she was struck by the realisation that it was full of women there to learn English – but many had been living in Australia for one or two decades.

“I realised this was my future if I didn’t change my present. The only person who can change my future is myself. I need to change my attitude around why I am here,” she says.

Restrepo, a political refugee from Colombia, came to Australia with hardly a word of English and little hope of being able to return to her professional career.

Many of her classmates were also refugees and some had never been in paid employment. “They had the same problems as me: lack of English and lack of confidence,” she says.

To help both herself and the other women, she started organising them, finding skills they could use to earn money and founded a social enterprise called [SisterWorks](#).

Based in Melbourne, SisterWorks assists women who are migrants, asylum seekers and refugees to start and run their own micro businesses. It helps them identify and learn skills they can use to earn money (such as crafts or cooking) and then coaches them on how to sell their products and make a business from them.

Women, in particular, appear to be drawn to start social enterprises, according to [Social Traders](#) – a not-for-profit company that helps develop social enterprises. These are defined as commercially viable businesses existing to benefit the public and the community, rather than shareholders and owners. In Social Traders’ skills development program, about 70% of participants are from social enterprises led by women.

SisterWorks is one of a growing number of social enterprises that aim to help people who have had to flee their countries of origin. Others include the [Bread and Butter Project](#) (training bakers), [Streat](#) (help for the homeless) and [Soft Landing](#) (recycling mattresses).

One of the particular challenges for businesses working with refugees is accommodating the needs of people who have been traumatised by their experiences.

For instance, when Restrepo arrived in Australia in 2010 with her husband and two daughters, she left after an incident where she was kidnapped, although she prefers not to elaborate. She was leaving behind everything she knew to escape the persecution she had suffered because of her leftwing politics.

Although trained as a medical doctor, she had been working as a communications expert and business administrator before she left. Her husband was an architect.

“I used to be a busy professional woman and the majority of my time was spent outside the home,” she says. Without the hired home help that is customary in middle-class Colombia, she had to learn to cook and clean for the first time with little money to live on.

“I fell into a big depression, with post-traumatic disorder because of the past experience and the present reality,” she says.

She launched SisterWorks in 2013 and it now involves about 80 “sisters” from 24 countries. Seven of them have already started their own businesses, 31 are now trading

and making between \$200 and \$400 per month, and 10 women are earning more than \$1000 per month.

Female-led social enterprises are more likely to focus on solving local, place-based issues, because that is what women see as they move around their own communities, says Cheryl Kernot, now a social business fellow at the Centre for Social Impact.

“They see a gap in the market, they spot unused buildings, they find ways to harness some aspects of business practices for social purpose,” she says.

Another Melbourne enterprise, the [Sorghum Sisters](#), is a case in point. It launched in 2004 in the kitchen of Carlton primary school to help women from the African community get into the workforce.

Founded by Siti Ibrahim, Nuria Khalil and Rahma Ibrahim, refugees from the Horn of Africa, the company trains people to work in hospitality and runs a catering arm that supplies African dishes to clients that include non-government organisations (NGOs) and government departments. It has about 1,500 clients on its database.

It began as a collaborative endeavour between AMES Australia (Adult Multicultural Education Services), the Horn of Africa Communities Network (HACN) and Carlton primary school.

The manager of social enterprises catering at AMES Australia, Melinda Hall, says many of the school mothers had never been to school themselves. “Over the years, we have probably had about 300 work placement clients come through and we have done a couple of rounds of hospitality training,” she says. She says the business tries to “clear” about \$900 per day, although she adds: “We haven’t broken even yet.”

Kernot says she is aware there is a lot of “social washing” by businesses, which are prepared to call themselves social enterprises if they give 10% of their profits to a cause. “However, the definition that we are coming to is that at least 60% of profits get reinvested in their core social purpose,” she says. “But the good ones I know are all [reinvesting] 100%.”

Other female-led social enterprises:

**[The Social Outfit](#)** employs and trains people from refugee and new migrant communities. Clients are offered training and experience in clothing production, retail and design at the retail store, on-site manufacturing, and sewing school in Newtown, Sydney. It was launched two years ago by chief executive Jackie Ruddock, who helped to raise \$25,000 by committing to wearing a Ken Done-themed outfit every day for a year and sharing the photos online.

**[Angkor Flowers and Crafts](#)** in Sydney’s south-west is a social enterprise to train women from refugee and migrant communities in floristry. Sophea Chea started the project in 2014 to create opportunities for social inclusion for women from cultures that do not encourage education in girls. Most of the women, so far, come from

Cambodia, Thailand, China and Myanmar although the service is open to people from all backgrounds.

**SettleIn** is an app to help refugees adjust to life in Australia, communicate with case workers, share paperwork and documentation, and help to plan and set goals. The idea for the app came from a TechFugees Australia hackathon in November 2015, when British aid worker Alice Brennan (now CEO) came together with a Syrian refugee (who prefers anonymity to protect his family in Syria) and Remi Duracher (co-founder of StartupSocial).