

Case study

Panchachuli



A trip to the Himalayas for a former school teacher inspired a business idea which is now providing women in the UK with fashionable scarves, shawls and stoles and is also helping transform the lives of women in Northern India.

When Mary King got back to the UK after her visit to the remote mountain range, she started her ethical trading company called Panchachuli, which is named after the area where the Bhotiya women live.

More than 800 women from 32 villages close to the border with Tibet are involved

in a cooperative to process the natural raw materials, including pashmina wool and nettles from the Himalayan plateaus, to hand-weave and knit the high-quality items which Mary now imports to the UK.

Mary, who works out of her home in Sturminster Marshall, came across the cooperative and its inspirational founder Mukti Datta while working as an oriental carpet restorer – a job she did after 25 years at the chalk face in Dorset.

She was immediately struck by the courage and determination of Mukti in setting up the cooperative against the odds and by the fact that many of the natural dyes used in the process were the same as she was using.

Mary said: "I found Mukti's story so inspiring I wanted to get involved."

After launching in October 2008, Panchachuli UK is now selling scarves, shawls and stoles in the UK, some of the proceeds of which go to help train more Bhotiya women and set up further cooperatives.

BUSINESS ISSUES

With more consumers being concerned about the conditions their clothes are made in and an increasing shift to using natural fibres, Mary saw an opportunity to start a business importing items made by the Bhotiya women.

But with no business experience, there were several hurdles to overcome, such as how to go about transporting the goods from Northern India, clearing customs and setting up a website.

SUPPORT FROM BUSINESS LINK

In April 2007, Mary attended a Business Link Women into Business course to find out how to put in place the building blocks she needed to start a business importing some of the cooperative's products.

She said: "I knew nothing about running a business so the Business Link course was very useful. I approached Business Link with my idea, we talked it through and they encouraged me to go for it."

Mary was helped on her journey by Business Link adviser Nick Hollingworth, who has worked closely with her from the pre-start up phase to date.

Nick said: "Dealing with a social enterprise overseas has, by its nature and the distance involved, been a complicated and drawn-out process for which Mary's patience must be praised.

"Clearly she has benefited from our Women into Business training programme, which ensured that her business was placed on a firm footing."

THE FUTURE

Mary describes Panchachuli UK as the 'antithesis of fast, throw-away fashion'.

"These are hand-loomed quality items of clothing which last a lifetime," she said.

Panchachuli is a member of the Ethical Fashion Forum which is a not-for-profit network focussing on social and environmental sustainability in the fashion industry – and exhibits regularly at its monthly meetings and seminars in London.