

Fashioning Success with Bangladesh

Eriko Yamaguchi is CEO and designer at Motherhouse, a company she started in 2006, at age twenty-four, to sell bags made in Bangladesh in Japan. The high quality of the bags, clothing, and scarves made by the local people have won over consumers, and in the five years since it was established, Motherhouse has expanded to set up seven stores in Japan and one in Taiwan. In 2008, Yamaguchi, who aims to make a social contribution through her business and to create brands for developing countries, was selected a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum, the organizers of the Davos Conference. She has also won acclaim as a young entrepreneur both in Japan and abroad. The Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji spoke with Yamaguchi.

How did you have the idea of making bags in Bangladesh?

Eriko Yamaguchi: When I worked in Washington, D.C. in the United States at an international organization assisting developing countries, I started to feel that I had to go and see the reality of developing countries for myself, and when I searched the Internet for “Asia” and “least developed country,” I hit on the name of Bangladesh. After returning to Japan from the United States, I went to Bangladesh and decided to enroll in a graduate school locally. While attending graduate school in Bangladesh, I came across jute through my job at a Japanese trading company. Jute is a natural fiber and Bangladesh and India account for 90% of global exports. Originally it was used to make bags for packing coffee beans. Since it is a durable and eco-friendly material, I thought I could use it to make cute bags with a natural texture to sell in Japan. People in Bangladesh take pride in producing merchandise that matches the needs of

developed countries, and not the low-priced, mass-produced items that are the norm for Bangladesh. I thought that creating such a company would be a sound and sustainable way of contributing to Bangladeshi society, and so I established Motherhouse.

What sort of effort goes into producing the high-quality merchandise?

The people working at the Motherhouse factory in Bangladesh earn wages that are twice the average local wage, and the working conditions are top class for the country with pensions, medical insurance and health checks included. However, the most important thing is that, at the factory, anyone can freely voice his or her opinions about the work. At the morning meeting, everyone gathers together in a circle for discussions. Speaking out is also connected to speakers taking responsibility. To produce high-quality merchandise, it is important that

the employees recognize themselves as the creators of the products.

The craftsman who is responsible for creating samples at the Motherhouse factory has had invitations from several factories saying, “We will pay you more than you earn now if you come here,” but tells me, “I am proud of the work I do for Motherhouse, and I will work here until I die.”

In what ways has local business changed because of Motherhouse?

Since Motherhouse started using jute as a material for fashionable bags, the price of jute has been rising on the domestic market in Bangladesh. Other factories have used jute to make bags like we do. However, hardly any of them have been able to export. One European corporation tried using jute to make bags in Bangladesh, but they were unable to make high-quality products, and in the end, they gave up on the idea. As a material, jute is extremely difficult to handle because it shrinks easily. We went through a process of trial and error, and we made a great number of samples before we finally managed to create products of satisfactory quality.

What has the international reaction been to Motherhouse products?

Half the customers buying the products in Japan are aware of the story of how our products are made, but in Taiwan, most people buy the products because they like the quality and design, and they are not aware of the background. This makes me extremely happy. Naturally, I want

Eriko Yamaguchi with a leather bag at the shop of Motherhouse in Tokyo



people to know that Motherhouse products have crystallized out of the efforts of people in Bangladesh. However, I believe that by its nature, fashion should make people happy.

That is why I don't want to sell by pushing the story behind the products on customers.

In my opinion, the ideal would be if people who buy our products noticed that it says Made in Bangladesh, and that they learn the story by reading our website.

Please tell us about the future of Motherhouse.

We would like to open another five or six stores in Taiwan in the next year or two. After that, we plan to open stores in Hong Kong. In the future, we would, of course, like to open stores in Paris and New York. That's a big dream for me! I believe there will be a day when we rub shoulders with Furla, Prada and Louis Vuitton. With this in mind, we moved the factory from the capital city, Dhaka, to the suburbs in November 2011. We plan to double the size of the factory and also to increase the number of employees from about 40 people to 100 people. We have imported state-of-the-art machinery from Italy for the factory. We would like to produce a higher grade of product by mixing the precision these machines are capable of with the warmth of handcrafted products. 