

MOMENTS OF INSPIRATION AND BEAUTY



MAI MUKAIDA

Mai Mukaida—founder and president of the Coffret Project and Lalitpur—has encouraged thousands of women to discover and pursue life’s beautiful moments. As she works to produce high-quality organic cosmetics in Nepal, Mukaida also seeks to instill a sense of confidence in Nepalese women.

SHANNON JIH

“If you could do anything you wanted, what would you want to do?” asks Mai Mukaida. With this simple question, she found a way to provide women with self-esteem and freedom while also creating jobs for the survivors of human trafficking in Nepal.

Mukaida became interested in philanthropic ventures when she was just fifteen years old. After a lecture by Kyohei Takatsu, an NGO worker in Nepal, Mukaida was inspired to visit the country, so she started saving money and visited Takatsu in Nepal two years later. Mukaida was struck by the beauty of the Himalayan Mountains, as well as how happy the people there were despite their struggles. But she also recalls being at a loss about what she could offer these people.

Mukaida discovered her life’s work in 2008 during her fourth year at Keio University, while doing fieldwork in Turkey. She interviewed many people to discover their needs by simply asking what they wanted to do. “I wanted to ask an open-ended question to understand people’s real interests,” recalls Mukaida. Many women responded by saying that they wanted to wear makeup to look more beautiful. Mukaida returned to Japan, gathered cosmetics and brought them back to Turkey, where she held the first Coffret Project workshop—“*coffret*” meaning “beauty box” in French.

Cosmetics became a way of connecting with people. “Of course you communicate through the colors of the makeup, but touching a person’s face also creates an intimate interaction and exchange,” Mukaida notes. Her heart still strongly tied to Nepal, Mukaida brought the Coffret Project to the country in December 2009. She was deeply affected by the sadness she saw in the girls at the shelters there. Cosmetics became Mukaida’s way of bringing back their smiles and self-esteem.

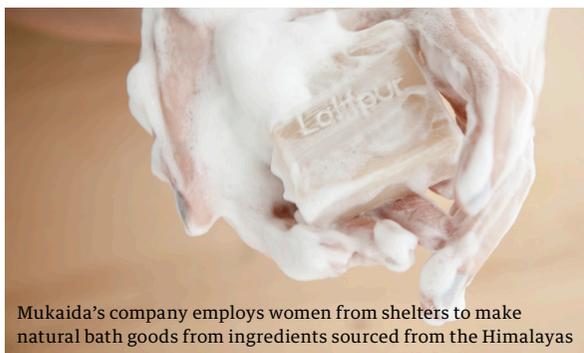
The Coffret Project expanded to include volunteer activities in Indonesia and Turkey. After the Great East Japan Earthquake struck Japan’s northeastern Tohoku region in 2011, Tohoku-born Mukaida brought her business home to Japan. As the city of Ishinomaki



Hand knitting in Lalitpur, the City of Beauty



Mukaida says touching a person's face creates an intimate interaction and exchange



Mukaida's company employs women from shelters to make natural bath goods from ingredients sourced from the Himalayas



Girls in Lalitpur hand knitting goods

struggled to recover from the tsunami that destroyed it, many people were continuing to commute to their jobs in Sendai City.

“It was very difficult for the women in Ishinomaki who’d lost their clothes and cosmetics to work alongside coworkers living in Sendai who still had their possessions,” recalls Mukaida. “When we brought one woman new makeup, she smiled and said that she could use these products when going to work.” The Coffret Project’s activities in Tohoku continued for about half a year.

Resuming her focus on Nepal, Mukaida considered other ways to support the women in shelters. The Coffret Project had been running for almost three years, and many of the women were building their self-confidence. Mukaida wanted to create jobs, so she asked the same question: “If you could do anything you wanted, what would you want to do?” Having experienced the power of beauty and cosmetics, the women wanted to stay in that field. After a year and a half of planning, Lalitpur—meaning City of Beauty—was established

in May 2013. The company employs women from the shelters to make natural skincare products from ingredients sourced around the Himalayas.

Lalitpur’s strength also lies in the collaborative efforts Mukaida brings to Nepal. Several Japanese artists came into the community to create packaging design, photographs and drawings for Lalitpur. By connecting with artists, Mukaida also hopes to bring a deeper awareness of the circumstances in Nepal. She is now working with a filmmaker and photographer to see what new ideas can take shape. And this year Mukaida has just launched “Message Soap, in time”—a new line to complement the existing basic line and men’s line. The series is a way for people to communicate their feelings by giving soap with a message printed on fabric hidden inside.

When asked about her plans and hopes, Mukaida says: “Up until now, I have been looking outward. I think it’s about time for me to question myself regarding my own strengths, to look inside and ask myself what I want to do.” Whatever the answer is, it will no doubt create a new beautiful moment. **W**