



Do Not Be Afraid, Open More Doors, Speak for Those Who Cannot and Grow Together with Them

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María Fernanda Burneo Sevilla is a multimedia graphic designer with a minor in photography, a Masters in Communication and a specialisation in strategic business communication. She has more than 10 years of experience in advertising, branding and environmental strategic communications working for organizations such as the Charles Darwin Scientific Foundation, Pachamama Foundation, Amazon Frontlines, Goldman Environmental Prize, CEDENMA and WWF. Maria is a proud mother of two strong girls and since 2019, she has dedicated her time on creating and launching her company Kikuyo: Alternativas Sostenibles (@Kikuyoec) focused on designing, manufacturing and marketing sustainable home and daily life alternatives to plastic and disposables, while also working as an independent consultant on strategic environmental communication.

Describe your professional journey, the challenges you faced as a woman and how you resolved them?

I am a happy Ecuadorian mother of two powerful girls. I have been passionate about nature since my childhood. I studied Graphic Design and specialised in Strategic Communication, which I have managed to tie in with my passion for environmental issues. Along this path, I have also connected my creative side as a designer with my company Kikuyo Ecuador. As a result, I have the opportunity to design and manufacture home products that replace plastic and disposables. However, I firmly believe that first, we have to change what we want by taking action. One of the biggest challenges I have faced as a woman has been the social inability to understand that motherhood is not disabling but can fit together in your professional life and even boost it. Mainly the way to solve it has been not falling into the system of disabling myself for being a mother, but looking for my path and alternatives, and showing myself that I can do everything without lowering my performance. But it is a long way.

Tell us about a professional accomplishment

I feel that through my company Kikuyo, I have managed to tie in all my beliefs not only professionally but also personally. I think businesses created by women have that factor, the balance factor, a principle that must apply today to everything on the planet.

Do you have any role models who inspire you?

I think it may sound cliché, but my best examples have been my parents. They have been an example of life, of perseverance, but also evolution. They have been part of significant changes in the world and their wisdom has taught them to handle those changes with calm and empathy. Also, they were the ones who inspired me to love and respect nature!

What is the role of women in the fashion industry?

Women are 'a fundamental pillar' in the fashion sector; be it clothing or home, as is the case with Kikuyo. The entire team is 80% women in finance, administrative and manufacturing roles for my products. Each plays a vital part in bringing their impressive capabilities into the organisation, details and creative capacity.

Does the fashion industry have a gender-equality issue?

I definitively think so. It was believed for a long time that those who manufacture products in the production chain are 'less important'. It means deplorable working conditions, low wages without security that become equal to those in slavery. Women have held the vast majority of these positions. However, that vision is outdated, inhuman and absurd; it is also very far from

reality. Manufacturing is the mainstay of the whole process and conditions must change, but that only happens if those who run companies do things the right way. It also occurs in agricultural production, especially in cotton farms that require female labour, who due to their special abilities treat raw materials carefully. Again, their working conditions are deplorable and inhumane in many parts of the world and we must demand a change.

Do you think, as a female designer, you have been confronted by gender bias, and what did you do to address it??

I think that, in general, there is a difference in treatment when you talk to a woman in the business and production sector. Generally, as a designer and entrepreneur, I have received comments that trivialise what I do, as if it were a hobby and not a company. That kind of attitude has helped me know who to negotiate with or not because it tells me a lot about the type of persons and business. On some occasions, I had made it clear to persons when their behaviour was incorrect. However, I never stay silent; that has never been an option.

What else do you wish to do to improve the contribution of women?

I believe we have the potential to build communities that, in the long run, can help develop a new system for the planet and our societies and be able further to strengthen family farming associations and women's small businesses to work synergies among all.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers in the fashion industry?

Do not be afraid, because we need you to open more doors, speak for those who cannot and grow together.

How do you promote equality in the fashion industry?

We are generating equitable conditions according to the needs of women, eradicating systematic violence and promoting safe spaces for all. We are also working with companies, factories and suppliers that share the same values regarding women's rights and personnel in both manufacturing and raw materials.

What kind of policies should the government enact to support working women?

We are eradicating systematic violence but as long as the state still practices violence against women, no law can help.

What do you suggest should change to remedy gender inequality?

Better working conditions in the manufacturing sector and for women in agriculture with suitable conditions for their work, health and children.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC