



Women Are Capable of Changing the World

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Maysa Motta Gadelha is from Minas Gerais. She lived in Paraíba for 43 years. Maysa is a training designer and social entrepreneur since 1985. She started working with organic cotton in Paraíba in 2000, initially as an agroecological initiative and later certified as organic. Building the production chain and raising awareness among farmers was the biggest challenge. Her organisation has the motto of 'Respect for people and the environment'. With important partnerships with serious institutions, the organisation continues to grow and encourage the increase of areas in the Brazilian semiarid region.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges.

Someone told me once that I'm a woman who talks to men on an equal footing. I was never discriminated for that, but respected, and with a lot of credibility. My challenges were at home, with husband and children. I was a very young mother. However, at the age of going out to work, my children were already old enough and did not need basic care. In fact, the biggest personal challenges were at home. My husband didn't prevent me from doing anything but at the beginning he made it clear what hindered him in his work as a doctor. Over the years, I started traveling alone to fairs and worked with farmers and the production chain without taking him out of his work. I decided, without forcing myself, doing what I needed to do, and things started to happen.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments

Paraíba today has an identity in national and international handicrafts, which is coloured cotton. Embrapa, which researched this technology, made it available to us in 2000 and since then we have built the production chain and the desire to have the product on the market. It worked and I am very proud of having been this person who today provides income opportunities for hundreds of artisans and farmers.

Have you had any role models, and how did they inspire you?

I confess that all my life I have been inspired by calm and persistent people. My husband is this calm person. I have the persistence as well as the power to listen and understand people and always seek peaceful solutions. Partners are fundamental to a good life and must always be treated well. Empathy is good for me and I believe for our products too.

How can you contribute as a woman to the sector?

I feel that people respect and listen to me, so my responsibility is even bigger. When people are inspired by you, it is very dangerous to have a bad attitude and my responsibility is to always position myself peacefully while focusing on the real goals.

What is the role of women in fashion industry?

In my opinion, women are the ones who manage fashion in the world. Not only through creations but in manufacturing, sewing, accessories, applications and crafts, but also as main fashion consumers

Does the fashion industry have a gender equality issue?

I don't think so, because most of the fashion industry is managed by women. I always seek to benefit the women who work with me throughout the chain. We know that there is no equality but we try to apply sorority, benefitting women in what depends on us.

As a female designer, what is your special contribution to the industry?

As a designer, I've been working on concept in fashion since 2000. Trying to value the product's history, reduce consumption and minimise waste, value women's handwork, value care for the environment and people, value knowledge from where the product comes from and where the money goes. Today these concepts are very widespread but weren't quite there 21 years ago.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women to this sector?

My greatest desire today and what I seek daily is to open up the market for solidary. Small farmers and artisans need to have a voice and to be seen to sell products so my job has been to look for new ways to bring income to women and farmers without market access and with products available.

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

My advice to young women is that they think about each other, that they have patience and persistence, that they learn to listen and see the reason for things. Put yourself in the place of others and don't find yourself victims of prejudice — fight for your space as a woman of courage.

What does the future for women in the fashion industry look like?

Women need justice and equality as well as sorority and patience.

Is help needed?

Yes, we always need help, in the dissemination, in the vision of each reality.

How can we promote equality in the fashion industry?

Publicising the work of women, young designers and entrepreneurs will empower women more.

What kind of policies should the Government implement against gender prejudices?

In recent times in Brazil, we have been experiencing an increase

of prejudice. Many policies are against reason. We need to propose an agenda of public policies of equality, to fight prejudices not only against women but against all minorities.

What is the one thing that you would like to see an immediate change to remedy gender inequality?

The government must change. We need training and education. Women are more focussed and responsible than men. They are the ones who take care of the children and provide them with love and care. Women are capable of changing the world.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC