

LIFE & TIMES

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BROWSER



Green and good

Sasibai Kimis on a heartfelt mission
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Making a difference

There is more substance than style in Earth Heir, a young venture selling silk shawls and pashminas, writes **Syida Lizta Amirul Ihsan**

SHE'S just 35 but Sasibai Kimis seems to have lived a lifetime. Bright and smart, the Ipoh-born high achiever went to a boarding school in Singapore in her teens before leaving for Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania to study Finance and Management.

At 21, she worked at investment bank Lehman Brothers (before it declared bankruptcy in 2008) and earned "what no 21-year-old is earning".

The money was good, but the pace — working way into the early morning for months on ends — was daunting. Her life, she said simply, was unfulfilled.

"Everyone was talking about whether the Nasdaq and Dow Jones went up or down. I realised I could either stay and help large corporations make money or I could start having my own life."

She did her Masters in Environment, Society and Development in Cambridge, trying to understand how development impacted the environment and vice versa. After her postgraduate studies, she went to Ghana to help people who were displaced when coal mining companies took over their land.

"Six months became two years," she says. She joined an NGO to teach people skills, agriculture practices and health and basic sanitation.



Earth Heir's handmade shawls.



"Consumerism has pushed people to buy more and it does that by bringing the prices lower, but at what cost?"

Sasibai Kimis

When she ran out of money, she went to London and worked in a private equity firm before landing a job with Khazanah Nasional Berhad, where she spent two years.

In-between her journeys, she kept thinking on how to help the poor by

combining a capitalistic route (earn a lot of money so she can help build infrastructure) with a charitable one (provide them with education, training, attention and care).

REGIONAL TRAVEL

We met one afternoon in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur. Dressed in a white shirt and cropped pants, she told me how she spent two months in Cambodia in her quest to bridge the capitalism-charity gap to help the poor.

In February this year, she started Earth Heir, a small online company selling hand and machine-woven pashminas and silk shawls.

She warned me that some people are intimidated by the prices. A machine-woven pashmina and silk, for example, costs RM488 but discerning customers are already returning for more saying they have paid more for the same quality.

"The market is so used to cheap, disposable clothes. Consumerism has pushed people to buy more and it does that by bringing the prices lower, but at what cost?" she asked.

She spoke of the collapse of the Dhaka apparel factory that killed more than 1,000 people that had Western retailers rethink their role in Bangladesh.

"Do we really know where these cheap clothes come from?" she asked.

Sasi, as she is affectionately known, is big on traceability and sustainability and she said she tries to include them in her work in simple, small ways.

She buys the shawls from the weavers or their co-operatives to cut out the middlemen and ensure the former get a substantial return for their work.

"We teach them to use environmentally-friendly dyes and not to dump waste into rivers. Where we



CARE FOR YOUR SILK SCARVES

- Silk scarves can be handwashed, but cashmere should be dry cleaned.
- Before washing, spot-test the fabric by blotting a water-moistened cotton ball. If the colour does not come off, it is safe to wash.
- Wash each scarf separately since colour run might happen.
- Use lukewarm water with mild fabric softener.
- Rinse well but avoid wringing or twisting it.
- Add several drops of white vinegar in the rinse water as it removes soap, restores shine and softens silk.
- Never dry silk in direct sunlight.



Sasi hopes to give poor women and children a boost through Earth Heir.



Colourful weaves by the women whom Sasi works with.

can, we influence them to operate in sustainable fashion," she said.

"Sustainability is a complex field, depending on how we define it. There are so many aspects and value chain to it,"

SILK ROAD

She sources her shawls from Cambodia, India and a group of weavers in Kuching, Sarawak. "A lot of silk in Cambodia was wiped out by the Khmer Rouge regime. And hand spun fabrics in Cambodia aren't as fine as those from Vietnam and China," she said.

"The quality of fabrics in India is very high and we work with the same people who worked under Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah to produce songket, so the quality is excellent."

Earlier last month, she set up a pop-up store in Bangsar Village in conjunction with Mother's Day. "It's harder to sell quality pieces to the people here. They say it's expensive. But it's silk and it's handmade. Weaving is a skill and with commercialism, people are less appreciative of that," she said.

"It's easier to sell to Westerners

because to start with, I don't have to convince them on issues of sustainability and quality."

She confessed that she wasn't sure if this venture will make enough money to sustain itself. She is also looking at other opportunities to finance Earth Heir.

Will she ever return to the rat race in case this venture doesn't work and she needs money to continue helping the poor?

"If I am really desperate. But given a choice, I'd rather not," she said.

Going into fashion and retail is a steep learning curve, she said, and it has been humbling. She believed that hardships build character and a successful life isn't judged by how much possession you own.

"You can be rich, and then what?" she asked. "Money can give you opportunities but what

do you want to do when you wake up everyday?"

Involved and passionate, small events affected her deeply, she said. When she was in Cambodia, she spent some time at a shelter for those rescued from human traffickers.



Do good

Half of Earth Heir profits go towards initiatives to improve living standards of craftpersons, supporting non-profits for exploited, trafficked persons and planting two trees with every scarf sold.



Sasi and her sister Pooma (right) in Cambodia.

SISTER ACT

SASI'S sister Poomabai Kimis, who's the head of business at the Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum in London, shares her thoughts on the business.

How do you market Earth Heir goods to those outside Malaysia?

Earth Heir is a start-up, and given that we have only been around as a company for about four months, we primarily use social media such as Facebook and Twitter to maximise exposure of our ethical efforts around the world.

Other means of highlighting Earth Heir have been through pop-up stalls.

I recently took part in an Ethical Fashion Show in London which brought together some of the top retailers such as People Tree, The Body Shop and Beulah.

Are you planning to expand and sell other products?

This is a key question, which I have a rather preliminary answer to now. Potential products are scarf accessories like scarf rings and a hand/tote bag and clutches line.

Since you work in London, how do you help Sasi in terms

of getting more people to know about Earth Heir?

Largely through pop-up stalls, wearing the scarf around London and just generally sharing with people as points of conversation.

I have 'strategically' gifted my boyfriend with a masculine striped silk scarf for him to parade around the streets of London!

Where do you see Earth Heir in a year?

Twelve months seem like a long time in my amateur entrepreneur's mind, but it really is not in the grander scheme of the business cycle.

I have great ideas and dreams for Earth Heir, and hope these will be realised in the next year. For example, we hope to have EH scarves displayed in Liberty stores by next year as it is a conscientious retailer and can support the ethical fashion trade quite significantly.

What gives you the motivation for this venture?

The fact that our efforts make a significant and measurable impact on people's lives keeps both Sasi and I going. The smiles on their faces, suffice to say, motivates me each day.

A six-year-old girl sat quietly in one corner while other kids played around. She went on to enquire why the girl was so solemn and the answer made her cry every time she thought about it.

"She was rescued just a week ago from a brothel."

As her tears fell, she told me what kept her going. "If it's only one person's life I can make better by my venture, then it's worth every effort," she said.

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The process of making a tie-and-dye shawl.



Colourful tie-and-dye silk shawls.