Filipinas navigate entrepreneurship in Kathmandu

By Arjay L. Balinbin Multimedia Editor

KATHMANDU, NEPAL Against the backdrop of rich cultures and traditions in the Kathmandu Valley, three Filipinas are navigating opportunities as entrepreneurs.

Sharon G. Shakya, Ludivina "Vina" Maharjan, and Sheilla Mae J. Manto, all with Nepali husbands, said their journeys have exposed them to unique and sometimes daunting challenges that come with running a business in Nepal.

Many Filipinas have established businesses in Nepal, including manpower agencies, education consultancies, inns, schools, spas, travel companies, cafes, bakeries, restaurants, and import-export trading houses, the Nepal-Philippines Chamber of Commerce and Industry said on its website.

Ms. Shakya, a dentist, moved to Kathmandu a few years back with the goal of making an impact on oral healthcare alongside her husband, who is also a dentist.

Yet, her journey did not stop at dentistry. While co-running Cosmo Dental Clinic with her husband, she ventured into the culinary world, opening a Filipino restaurant called Cebu Fiesta in Lalitpur, a city on the outskirts of the capital Kathmandu.

"Cebu is already like my second home in the Philippines because that's where I met my husband when he was studying there," Ms. Shakya told BusinessWorld, explaining why she named her restaurant after Cebu despite being born in Negros, another region in the central

Ms. Shakya is among Filipinas who married Nepali spouses they met at Philippine medical schools. This is not surprising, as the relationship between Nepal and the Philippines is often linked to education. "We have hundreds

of Nepali students going to the Philippines for studies, including aviation training and medicine," said non-resident Ambassador of the Philippines to Nepal Ramon S. Bagatsing, Jr. in an interview with local news agency myRepublica in 2022.

"Most Filipino women living in Nepal are married to Nepali men," Mr. Bagatsing noted.

For Ms. Shakya, her restaurant is more than just a business venture; it is a cultural bridge connecting the flavors and traditions of the Philippines with the Nepalese palate.

She also envisions Cebu Fiesta as a place where people from various backgrounds in the Himalayan nation can come together to savor Filipino dishes and learn about Filipino culture.

"It is a good start for us that we are slowly introducing our food our culture — here," she said.

The restaurant offers a diverse selection of Filipino dishes, with the bestsellers being lechon kawali (crispy fried pork belly), sisig (sizzling pork dish), and chicken adobo (chicken stew).

Cebu Fiesta, nestled in a residential area near schools and other small businesses, is adorned with Filipino handicrafts like buri products, creating a welcoming Filipino ambiance. The menu also features sinigang (sour soup), crispy pata (deep-fried pork leg), chop suey (vegetable stir-fry), halo-halo (shaved ice dessert), and more.

FROM DOMESTIC HELPER TO JEWELRY BUSINESS

The story of Ms. Maharjan, executive director at Classic Diamond Jewellers, is one of ambition and relentless pursuit. She began her journey as a domestic helper in Hong Kong but took an unexpected path when she married a jeweler from Nepal.

Born and raised in La Union province in the northern Philippines, Ms. Maharjan's journey embarked from a place where opportunities were scarce.



PILGRIMS walk around Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal on Sept. 9.

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According to Ms. Maharjan, the year 1996 marked the inception of the jewelry business.

With a modest budget, her husband's family ventured into the jewelry trade. The journey began within the confines of their

"The whole family started it, because in Nepal it's usually a joint family business," she said.

"I didn't join the business immediately. I worked at a travel agency in Nepal for two years just to learn the language, and after that, I went to India to gain knowledge of diamond assorting and colored stones, where I stayed for six months," she added.

She said that understanding every aspect of the business, from the ground up, was essential. She had also spent five years working in the family's jewelry factory.

"After that, we opened our first store in Lalitpur, then in America, in Jackson Heights, New York, and in Maryland, and then in Europe. I think we have four stores,"

Ms. Maharjan said her love for jewelry traces its roots to her childhood. From a young age, she was captivated by the sparkle of precious gems, a fascination that deepened during her time in Hong Kong.

"Whenever I would pass by the streets of Hong Kong, I would always look for jewelry."

While she may not consider herself an artist, she said that her passion and keen eye for aesthetics drive her design process.

Drawing inspiration from various sources such as the internet and magazines, she said that she brings her unique touch to each

"Almost everything here, I designed. They are not exactly my designs — I got the idea from the internet or magazines and just modified them," she said.

The jewelry business takes pride in its diamond-encrusted crowns, particularly tiaras, which are popular not only among royalty but also among stylish customers.

According to her, skilled workers from Kolkata, India, known for their expertise in jewelrymaking, are the foundation of the craftsmanship that distinguishes their jewelry.

She is proud to see her creations worn at parties and special events, she said, recognizing them by their distinct finishing and settings.

"I recognize them — they look different because of the finishing."

MOTHERHOOD TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Ms. Manto, a registered nurse from Cebu, set foot in Nepal in 2018. Having met her husband, Suav Zuwa, who studied medicine in the province, their shared passion for improving lives through skincare and medicine kindled the idea of bringing their expertise to Nepal.

The couple started their entrepreneurial journey by venturing into retail, a decision rooted in "understanding the local needs and desires" of the Nepalese people. "From brightening skin to combating acne scars," Ms. Manto said, they recognized the demand for cosmetic products in Nepal.

Ms. Manto, a registered nurse and a mother of three, said she was determined to balance the responsibilities of motherhood with her entrepreneurial dreams. Her background in customer service and sales in the Philippines also provided valuable insights into handling customers effectively, she noted.

"I want to take care of the kids while doing the business," said Ms. Manto, president of Zuwa Cosmetics.

Soon, they diversified their operations, delving into import and export activities between the Philippines and Nepal, by introducing their own skincare brands under the Zuwa Cosmetics umbrella.

Recognizing the low trade volume between the Philippines and Nepal, "we saw an opportunity to contribute," said Mr. Zuwa, Ms. Manto's husband.

Over the past 25 years, Nepal's exports to the Philippines have increased at an annualized rate of 7.39%, rising from \$30,800 in 1996 to \$184,000 in 2021. In contrast, the Philippines' exports to Nepal have seen a more substantial annualized increase of 12.2%,

growing from \$351,000 in 1996 to a notable \$6.21 million in 2021. These figures are based on data obtained from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), a data visualization site for international trade data.

According to Mr. Zuwa, a key milestone in Zuwa Cosmetics' journey was the positive reception of Philippine-made skincare products in Nepal.

The products "gained good attention especially during the summer months," he told BusinessWorld.

The couple also highlighted the similarities between Nepal and the Philippines. Both nations share an Asian heritage and a preference for brighter and flawless skin. Consequently, there is a high demand for exfoliants and whitening products like glutathione, collagen, and tretinoin in both countries.

After a brief hiatus due to the pandemic, the company resumed operations in December 2022 and imported a substantial 4,000 to 5,000 kilograms of cosmetic products in the previous quarter, he noted.

The company, he also said, encountered "no resistance" when introducing its products in either the Philippines or Nepal, witnessing rapid growth fueled by the shared enthusiasm for "trying new, unique, and effective" cosmetic solutions.

Ms. Manto uses TikTok to market her company's products. Initially, TikTok served as a modest platform for their marketing efforts, but the shift toward livestreams and engaging video content significantly boosted sales, she noted.

"Sheila herself wants to be on TikTok, and this trend, I think, is inspired by beauty company CEOs in the Philippines," Ms. Manto's husband said, noting that the platform enables direct engagement with customers and aids in product improvement. Zuwa Cosmetics in



your smartphone or by typing the link

Nepal operates from its own office in Kathmandu and delivers products nationwide, offering cash-on-delivery services. "We have had around 40,000 customers reach out to us," said Ms. Manto's husband.



DoST seeks 'commercial benefits' in R&D for small businesses

SMALL BUSINESSES often face hurdles related to technology adoption, financial assistance, and the development of innovative products, according to the Department of Science and Technology (DoST).

This makes it imperative for research and development (R&D) programs to offer tangible commercial benefits, DoST Undersecretary Sancho A. Mabborang said on Monday during the press conference of the agency's "Regional Science, Technology, and Innovation Week" at the University of the Philippines Los Baños.

Programs are already in place to address the challenges faced by micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), he

However, improvements must still be made to sustain the innovation ecosystem the department is working toward, he also said.

"We are focusing on how all these science and technology innovations can be transferred to the target beneficiaries," said Teodoro M. Gatchalian, DoST undersecretary.

"Even if we develop state of the art innovations, if no interested commercial outlet can purchase, develop, and manufacture, all these R&D programs will just go to nothing," he

"Our focus is to determine how 'commerciable' the development of the technology is, and how this technology can be adopted by the people — the transfer of tech."

In the 2022 Global Innovation Index of the World Intellectual Property Organization, the Philippines ranked 59th out of 132 countries, with a weakness indicated in sustaining innovation efforts over time, particularly in knowledge and technology outputs. Among the pain points are new businesses and scientific and technical articles.

The country's place lowered from 51st in 2021 and 50^{th} in 2020.

The DoST is offering up to P5 million in financial assistance loan, an increase from the previous P3 million maximum amount, through its Small Enterprise Technology Upgrading Program (SETUP).

"In the past, we were only assisting MSMEs on very conventional and basic technologies, but at the moment, there are MSMEs that are ready to be transformed," Mr. Mabborang said on SETUP providing e-commerce and automation technology aid for businesses.

SETUP supplies MSMEs with equipment and technical assistance they need for productivity and competitiveness.

"60% are into food processing, and about 20% are into metals and engineering, but there are also some sectors that would like to invest in health and wellness because of the pandemic," Mr. Maborrang said on in-demand industries he is seeing.

Other DoST initiatives for MSMEs include technology business incubators (TBIs) and the development of knowledge, innovation, science, and technology (KIST) ecozones, which both foster unique local academic participation in business development to strengthen the ecosystem.

Anthony F. Genuino, mayor of Los Baños, noted the importance of localizing technology and R&D in provinces and municipalities according to its industry of strength, "We have to define our fixed direction to stimulate the entire ecosystem."

The DoST has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) last March to conduct capacity building for MSME industry growth through a PCCI-DoST council.

- Miguel Hanz L. Antivola

