

PNG indigenous business women claim their right to respect

by Annette Sete

19 December 2025



PNG business owners attend the 2025 World Indigenous Business Forum in Melbourne: Anne-Shirley Korave, Queenpads; Annette Sete, Maku Gifts and Lava Girl; Florence Kamel, Jaukae Bilum Products; Evelyn Mopafi, Apo Meri Social Enterprise; Eli Webb, PNG Women's Business Resource Centre

Photo Credit: DFAT

I am a woman in business in Papua New Guinea. This is my 11th year managing a small business. The business focuses on sharing our people's journeys and cultures through prints on fabric and women's clothing items, such as *meri blouses / kolos*, and PNG-themed gifts, including handmade crafts.

It is my experience that the public attitude towards "women in business" in PNG is one of sympathy instead of seriousness or respect. It is a common phenomenon stemming from deeply-rooted gender stereotypes and unconscious biases, that has worked its way into the conversations that you have with bank officials, government officials and even donor agencies' program managers, despite their best intentions.

These entities address women in business with condescension, in many instances engaging in brand washing, where a company falsely claims to support causes or share your values just to sell products. It is becoming a common marketing technique in PNG. It has impacts on how we access finance and other support to grow our businesses.

It also perpetuates the impression that women who own businesses are "market mamas" or street sellers. There are many women in business at all levels. They are successful too. But both the government's and the donor agencies' focus is on the micro businesses — which need more interventions to survive — and this can have the unintended effect of pushing small businesses into the informal sector.

This approach also overshadows support for medium-sized businesses that are women-owned, led and managed. These medium-sized businesses are in their growth phase. They need a hand, but are not necessarily supported given, in most cases, the rhetorical spin about empowering women in small businesses, reflecting the informal sector bias.

The challenges for women in business are same regardless of which level the businesses are at.

Access to finance remains our number-one challenge. Gender-based violence and systematic cultural biases are a major issue. Lack of infrastructure for doing business is a country-wide barrier. Another is data scarcity, because many micro, small and medium-sized businesses in PNG, women-owned or not, do not keep business records. This makes it difficult for appropriate innovations to be introduced.

I was one of five PNG women in business invited and funded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to attend this year's [World Indigenous Business Forum](#) (WIBF) in Melbourne. We represented businesses, social enterprises and the [PNG Women in Business Resource Centre](#) — a key institution aiming to empower women to enter the entrepreneurial space. This was my second time attending a WIBF, the first being when it was held in Port Moresby in 2023.

This most recent WIBF inspired my fellow business owners and me to try new approaches for our businesses. I came away with three main ideas.

First, to re-examine my business model to refocus on our story. That is, to have a stronger focus on cultural values, community impact and the social wellbeing of the communities where we operate.

Second, to realign our goals towards productivity and social impact, because I see that indigenous businesses can break into complex markets with a focus that's aligned with their core — our cultural values, our ties to the country and how we value our peoples.

Third, to stay connected to a network of indigenous business owners, not only to keep me grounded in my business but to give me business opportunities, keep me up-to-date with trends and allow me to be empowered by others' stories, best practices and lessons.

Attending WIBF provided the space to learn how other indigenous businesses strive despite challenges. Matching us with similar businesses owned by First Nations women was a smart idea. It fostered real conversations on subjects that we knew and identified with.

Through this forum, I joined the Indigenous Women in Industry global organisation, and I look forward to attending their [2026 summit in Vancouver](#).

I am also preparing to be part of the first-ever World Indigenous Fashion Show, to be held in Melbourne — a result of this year's WIBF. The show is focused on export

buyers so it's of great interest to me.

At a regional level, the PNG participants all signed on to support, as individuals and businesses, and on behalf of PNG as a country, the formation of the Pacific Indigenous Businesses Chamber of Commerce. This new body will give us access to support for indigenous businesses in the Pacific Ring of Fire.

It is sharing, learning and building on strengths from each other's experiences that makes the WIBF a worthwhile experience. I also feel that I'm in a better place to push for a PNG Indigenous Businesses Chamber of Commerce to mobilise PNG businesses to work together.

And, as a woman in business, I'd love to work on changing the perception of women in business in my country — out with requiring sympathy and in with demanding respect.

Author/s:

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Annette Sete is a Papua New Guinean entrepreneur and fashion designer, known as the founder of the brands Lavagirl and Maku Gifts. She is an advocate for the PNG small and medium enterprise sector and for protecting indigenous intellectual property rights.

Link:

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