

YELIZ

Uniqueens

« Be Unique, Be Yourself »

Yeliz is a Turkish woman who has been living in Ioannina for about ten years now. After travelling and then settling with her family in the city, she recently launched her store of creations and accessories, products created and handmade by self-employed women in Turkey.

Her store, [Uniqueens](#), is full of all kinds of unique and handmade wonders.

I went to meet her, and we discussed feminism, sisterhood, parenthood, and women empowerment.



Who are you?

I am a human being that is changing day by day, as time goes by, trying to adapt to what life brings and trying to be a good person in harmony with the planet.

I want to be a good role model for my kids, and I am trying to parent them in a way that they will be good people for the future, for society as well as for the planet.

Of course, as parents we make mistakes. I have learned many things from becoming a mother. I discovered myself from a different dimension. I discovered my limits, in terms of patience, in terms of giving from your life to another person without expecting anything in return. I better understood myself when I became a mother. And I also learned about my priorities, about trying to find a balance. You must be yourself to be a good parent.

My kids are learning about that also, and we try to show them different perspectives. Until the pandemic began, we were travelling, showing them things. Kids are hungry to learn, and it is not always easy to find the correct answer, but you figure it out.

What do you do in life?

Before going to Istanbul to study at University, I was living in a small town, and I was often going to my grandparents' house on the seaside of Turkey. It was always on my mind that I did not want to return to my hometown because the world is so big that I wanted to explore it.

I studied chemical engineering and I found a good job with a good income. At that time, my goal was to take a holiday abroad at least once a year. And until I got married, that is what I did. I was travelling around the

world thanks to my job and the opportunities I had, and seeing different cultures, how diverse we are but, in the end, also how the basics are the same. It was good for me to explore those different cultures, different working disciplines, it was good also in terms of business life. I became more “international” let us say, discovering different work environments and I was combining it with photography.

After I came here [Ioannina, Greece] and after having my kids, these last 10 years, we could not do much traveling. We did things more locally instead.

Besides that, I always worked. After graduating from University, I never stopped. I think a woman should be earning her own money somehow, standing on her feet is important. Coming here, I found some small jobs until I opened my business. Of course, in the last 8 years, because of the kids and because of the environment - it is a small city - things are limited, I was more “child focused”. Now it is starting to change. Even if COVID limits us currently, I am still trying.

Can you tell me about your project Uniqueens?

About my project, it started before the pandemic last year. And by coincidence my logo is a “corona”, in Greek that means crown [laughing]. I do not know if it is good luck or bad luck.

I found some women in Turkey who were making handmade accessories and I wanted to introduce them to the market in Greece. They already have their own business in Turkey, and they have their own customers. They also have some customers worldwide, but in Greece I did not see these kinds of products and I thought it was also a good opportunity for me. I believe in these products, so I brought them here. But I could not start because of the beginning of the pandemic.

After that I had an opportunity to pursue my project: the government was supporting entrepreneurship through a funding program. So, I got this opportunity,

and I went into it for one year; that is how I opened my business: my store.

All the items that are here are handmade by women. So directly or indirectly we can say that we support women in business, and we provide unique products to wear and enjoy.

Now that I have the shop, I also started creating my own designs.

I have another line as well on children's garments. To purchase a good product, I need to see and feel the quality. So, for that reason I need to travel, and this is limited due to Covid.

In this collection what I am trying to bring is “gender-free” clothes. I have of course some “girlish” or “boyish” things because you cannot separate them in the standard packages suppliers offer. The market is focusing on gender. But if I can choose, I try different color combinations for the mother who raises boys and girls not to change it by gender.

The fact that you do not want to gender your products is remarkably interesting. What does it mean for you to be as gender neutral as possible?

I do not think colors have genders. This is a weird message sent to kids. Everybody should wear what they want to wear.

It is also a marketing strategy to make lines for boys and others for girls, because it increases your sales. But as a consumer - because I am also a consumer - my son wore my daughter's princess tops, because I do not want to buy something new that my son will wear for maybe only a month.

Overconsumption is not only a matter of budget, but it is not environmentally friendly either. That is why I wanted to create **Zoe & Alex**, a brand that can offer gender-neutral options.



« Change is not easy, but if you are open to it, it slowly comes to you »

Do you think what you do has an impact on the empowerment of women?

I hope so [laughs], because the women I am working with, most of the time produce at home. I know that some of them are in small cities, with limited work opportunities, or they are busy taking care of their children and they are doing this as a side business, so I want to support them. And when I see how eager they are to make you satisfied with their products, it is also something that you want to support.

I think that they touch my life in some way, and I touch theirs somehow. This is an exchange between us. They tell you about themselves, you are entering in their life, and I also share with them things about me.

And it goes from woman to woman. At the end of the day other women are using the products that are created by women, produced by women, and I am in between them.

It is a kind of sisterhood if I can say that?

It is a kind of sisterhood yes. For example, for the 8th of March, for Women's Day, they do not expect anything from me, but I send to all of them a thank you message so they know that they are actively contributing to my project. I tell them about the importance of handmade, and how it comes from the soul of the creator.

It is easy to be rude, it is easy to criticize when you are in the same business. So, I think you should appreciate good work when you have it and you should not forget about it, and I am trying to do this with my suppliers.

In this century, I think we have started to forget about being kind and to appreciate the work of others. And I remind myself of this. When you make the other person satisfied, you also feel happier.

What does it mean to you to be a woman?

Unfortunately, what we are going through still in 2021, still speaking about equality and women's rights reveals that we are not at the level of civilization that we should be, we are late. There are a lot of facts pointing to this: people are not educated, women have pressure on them to speak out loudly to be heard, and laws are maybe not enough to protect women. Still, we are talking about these things, especially with what is going on in Turkey right now. There are women murdered each and every day. Last year 400 women were killed by an ex-husband, ex-boyfriend, existing boyfriend, or husband. This violence continues. And not only as a woman, as a human being this hurts. I do not know what I can do as an individual but if I see something that I can contribute to, I will be there as a woman, as a human being, as Yeliz, I will be there.

It is true that the current women's rights situation in Turkey is complicated right now.

There was an international agreement that was signed in 2011, and Turkey withdrew from this agreement. Yes of course with the Constitution there are laws that protect women. But this international agreement was auditing if the Constitution works correctly. When we canceled this agreement, there is no longer an upper authority that can check if the law is working correctly in Turkey now, and this is so sad.

I hope we will soon be on the same level with men in terms of safety, business rights, education, in terms of being free. I hope one day it will not be an issue in any country.

And being a mother, does all of this have an impact about the way you raise your kids?

At home I am lucky because my husband does the housework. I am not saying that he “helps me with the housework”, he does it. Because if we are living together in a home environment, two adults and two kids, the housework belongs to everybody, not just the woman.

This is good role modeling for my son, that his father also does the housework. It is an important message for him as in the future the same will be expected from him. And slowly, because of my kids’ age, they start doing more things at home. And we do not classify chores for girls or boys.

They also see me working, being active in business life, so this is good for my daughter that she is taught to be active.

Tell me about a woman who inspires you?

I was thinking of two women that I knew from a previous job position. I could not select one of them, but then I realized that they have a lot in common. I was a junior when I met them, they were in mid-level management. There were people underneath them as team-members, and I liked how they were balancing communication, respect, all with kindness. Those people give you this feeling that you are part of a team, and this was good motivation for a person like me who was at a junior level.

I think I liked how they were sincere in their approach. On the other hand, they were teaching you the discipline and respect needed in a business environment. It is important to have support from your manager, and they were giving this support, they were there for you. I think those are the key elements for not only women but for everybody, these sorts of

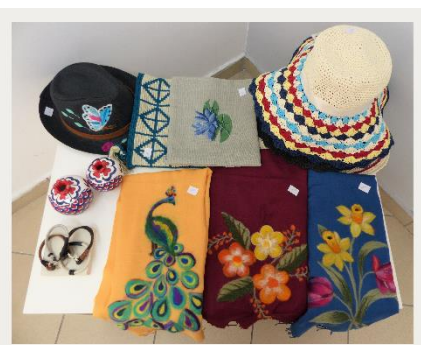
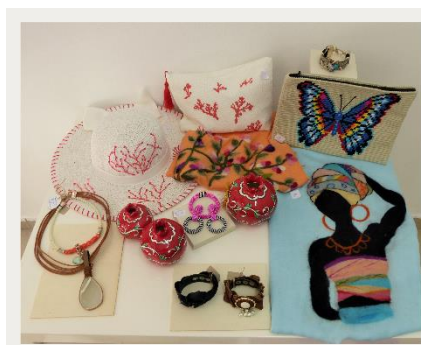
communication skills. And these two women had those.

Does it help you for your shop?

It helps me because I try to see from others’ perspective. It does not mean that it always works, but most of the time it comes back to you as a benefit. In my business life for example, sometimes the products that my suppliers create have some damages, and they could send them like that, and it would be difficult for me to send them back, but they do not send me something that they do not like. They have this kind of responsibility toward me. Communication becomes more open because there is trust between us. When you give this message, I think it works.

Your project is inspiring, and I like what we talked about. About gender, about the way you have influence on others, but that you get this influence from others also, for women empowerment. And overall human kindness and trust.

All of us have faults, we are not perfect. I have things that I need to improve. But I think the key point is being aware of it. Change is not easy, but if you are open to it, it slowly comes to you. When I observe my improvement areas - improvements that sometimes a friend shares with me, sometimes a family member, sometimes your kid, sometimes a customer - I take it and I evaluate it. I know my core values; I am not changing them. But in the “grey-areas” I am trying to give the best version of myself. Everything is changing very quickly all over the world and to get to that point you also need to renew yourself, but keep the core values, not to lose those. And as you get older, you become more mature about this. There are some things that in the past were in my core values that can be replaced by something else because our role changes, conditions change. So, you need to update and adapt yourself to that. ●



To see Yeliz's work:

- www.uniqueens.gr
- www.facebook.com/Uniqueens.gr
- www.instagram.com/uniqueens.gr

« UNIQUEENS was founded in February 2020 with the dream of becoming a world renown brand that represents small businesses. All accessories are handpicked and handmade by local women living and working in remote areas. Our brand philosophy is to be a strong supporter and representative of women empowerment starting with local designers.

UNIQUEENS brings out the personality and creativity of sensitive women. Our products are for all you beautifully unique women who see fashion as a means of expression and for this reason each of our collections also has a "custome made" option. The design you've always wanted but can't find – can now become your own personal accessory, made by UNIQUEENS, which in turn will also support the continuity of small businesses. »