



**Aiisha Ramadan poses in front of some of her designs in a Chocolate & Pickles retail outlet in Dubai's Wafi Mall.** Nicole Hill / The National

# From stitch to store

**Funding your fashion dreams takes work.** It took several years of managing labour and operational costs for Corset Fashions to see their designs land in shops. **Inga Stevens reports**

Learning the art of stitching at an early age in her homeland, Lebanon, soon became a passion for Aiisha Ramadan. Channelling her creative energy into fashion design came naturally and, after years of perseverance, this talented young 26-year-old has carved a name for herself with her very own women's fashion line, Aiisha at Corset Fashions. Finding success in the fashion industry requires a unique set of skills and keen business acumen, and with a supportive family, a quality educational background in design and sound investment, Ms Ramadan's dream has become a reality.

Ms Ramadan was two when her family relocated to the UAE, having escaped the war in Lebanon in 1985. "Setting up my business in the UAE was therefore a natural progression," Ms Ramadan says. "I see the UAE as a fantastic set-up platform for businesses and there is a lot of potential for growth."

While growing up in the UAE, Ms Ramadan and her family spent their summers back in Lebanon, where she practised drawing and stitching as a hobby. "I acquired basic stitching techniques from my aunt, who also gave me fabric leftovers to make clothes for my Barbie dolls. My passion grew through the combination of handling fabric and drawing, and I eventually chose to major in fashion design and marketing at the American University in Dubai, where I graduated in 2002."

"In the beginning I had to outsource my designs to other tailors and embroiderers until I was able to consider doing it on my own," Ms Ramadan says. "Progress took time as it was only me and my creative ideas. To this day, I am inspired by the idea that there is always something new to learn, something to further yourself for."

Ms Ramadan says her inspiration varies from one collection to the other, but she primarily uses herself as the muse behind her designs. "Every human being is complex and I enjoy channelling my mood swings and varying taste into my designs," she says. "Although experimenting on myself is the core of my inspiration, each collection is inspired by its own source. In the last collection, I was wearing so much flashy nail polish and, without knowing it, I was looking for fabrics with such tones."

Ms Ramadan describes her designs as affordable and her clientele is primarily women who travel and are in touch with the international fashion scene.

She acquired a design workshop in Sharjah in 2007. The high rents in Dubai meant that she would be better off financially being based in the marginally more affordable emirate. "The start-up fees cost me around Dh550,000 [US\$150,000] and I managed to get the funds together without relying on loans,

credit or business partners," Ms Ramadan says. "These fees included the cost of the appropriate licences, rent for my workshop, interior decor, sponsorship fees, the cost of employee visas, and all of the equipment and machines I need for my design work."

Investing in the quality of the product is something Ms Ramadan firmly believes will yield rewards in the future. She says: "I invest a lot of time and money into my materials. My agent in Dubai sources my fabrics primarily from Europe, including French, Italian, and Swiss textiles and styles. We also explore other fabrics from India, Japan and Korea to add further depth to our designs."

Ms Ramadan's fabrics cost between Dh45 and Dh3,000 a yard depending on the country of origin. Her accessories are mainly crafted using Swarovski crystals, which can be priced anywhere from Dh200 all the way into the thousands.

Remaining competitive in such a fast-moving market can be a challenge for many retailers. Ms Ramadan believes that her prices have always remained affordable and she aims to maintain high quality by producing a manageable number of designs. "I want every modern woman who appreciates fashion to be able to purchase

my pieces without having to save her entire salary for it," she says. "In the end, I don't ask for what I wouldn't pay myself."

Her prices start at around Dh1,500 and can go as high Dh4,200 for the high-end ready to wear designs. The price for a haute couture piece depends on the particular design, but usually starts at Dh15,000. For a normal design it can take between one and two weeks to complete, but the individual designs in the haute couture collections can take as long as 12 weeks to design and manufacture.

Setting up a business in Dubai has its usual challenges, including the administrative red tape that surrounds visa regulations and licensing laws, not to mention the challenges of finding affordable commercial space to rent. For Ms. Ramadan, finding talented cutters, tailors and embroiderers to hire was a challenge in itself.

"The hiring process can be complex and, due to the stringent regulations on the UAE workforce, it can be an ordeal to employ foreign workers," she says. "You can't test them out before you hire them, so the process can be very tedious if you get it wrong." Most of her design staff comes from Asia and the Middle East, while some of the freelancers are employed from Europe.

Corset Fashions employs five full time employees, and two additional staff members will soon to join the cast of designers. "It usually costs around Dh10,000 to take on an employee, including visa, medicals and the cost of tickets from their country of origin," Ms Ramadan says.

Brand exposure is a large part of the success of her fashion line, and Ms Ramadan has a PR representative to take care of her marketing needs. "In the early stages of my business I would advertise in some of the top fashion magazines, but eventually the press became interested in me as a person and wanted to know more about my story and my collections," she says. "My website [www.aiisha.com], my blog and my participation at the Dubai Fashion Week in 2008 also helped spread the word."

Fortunately for Ms Ramadan, the prevailing financial crash has not had a huge affect on her sales. "I believe it may be down to the fact that my prices were never that high compared to some other regional and international designers," she says.

"The credit crisis also coincided with my showcasing my designs at a variety of boutiques around Dubai, including Studio 8, Chocolate & Pickles, Le Balcon des Createurs, and soon in Soirée, which helped with brand awareness," Ms Ramadan says. Corset Fashions does not pay a fee to be sold in these boutiques.

With the challenges of operating a business in the UAE and the rising cost of living, Ms Ramadan is considering moving the logistics of the business to Lebanon, where labour costs and rent are up to 20 per cent lower. "I have, however, heard about an initiative by the UAE government to lower operational and administrative costs for small businesses; I hope we see that happening soon," she says.

Within the next couple of years Ms Ramadan anticipates that Corset Fashions will be firmly established in the European and Asian markets, as well as the Middle East. "Because I have always loved collaborating with big companies, I intended to keep this ongoing in the future," Ms Ramadan says.

"More interestingly, rather than having to constantly push for collaborations, companies are now approaching me directly, and we have even been invited to showcase our designs in Miami, Qatar and London."

Ms Ramadan credits her success to a few core qualities. "Passion for what you do is a quintessential quality, as it will help you move forward and develop your business idea. Make sure that you're offering something different from your competitors and always invest time and effort into studying the market thoroughly before you sign up for anything that will have your name on it."



**Several of Aiisha Ramadan's fashion designs are displayed at the Chocolate & Pickles clothing store.** Nicole Hill / The National