



IMPACT STORY



DRIVING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP, INNOVATION, AND LEADERSHIP IN INDIA

Gauhar Fatma and her sister Sahila is seen here making a charpoy bench for Sirohi. Photo credit: Shubhangini Prakash

India's female labour force participation has been declining and only 21 per cent¹ of women were employed as of 2019, well below the global average of 47 per cent². The private sector is an important catalyst in sustainable development and economic growth. UN Women's WeEmpowerAsia Programme partners with public and private sector companies to create opportunities for women entrepreneurs and women-led businesses to grow while promoting gender equality at the workplace, marketplace and in communities.

"Thanks to WeEmpowerAsia, I managed to make industry connections for growing my business which I would not have made otherwise. I also improved my [public] speaking skills and confidence to present my business to investors," says **Gauri Agrawal, Founder of Sirohi**, a company that produces sustainable home furnishings and decorations.

Agrawal is a social entrepreneur from northern India's Muzaffarnagar district, where women and girls are often married off early and rarely supported to succeed in business. She had an innovative business idea: Her brand, Sirohi, upcycles plastic and textile waste to create sustainable home decorative products using traditional weaving styles of rural women artisans of Muzaffarnagar. However, she lacked access to financing, international markets and supply chains.

WeEmpowerAsia's Industry Disruptor, an innovation platform, connected Agrawal with global brands H&M and Tchibo and assisted her in co-creating sustainable solutions. UN Women and UNDP's Investor Consortium, another initiative with the government's public policy think-tank NITI Aayog, provided her with dedicated mentoring support by business experts and a platform to pitch her idea to investors. As a result, Sirohi received leads for investment and grant funding. Today the company employs more than 80 rural women artisans and makes over 350 unique sustainable products.

PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

UN Women has teamed up with the European Union to implement the WeEmpowerAsia programme in China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam.

To date, WeEmpowerAsia (2019-2022) has allocated EUR 8 million in seven countries to drive women's entrepreneurship and leadership in business.

The programme also supports private sector companies to become signatories of the Women's Empowerment Principles.

H&M is a signatory of the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) a set of seven principles that guide businesses to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace and community, designed by UN Women and UN Global Compact. Consistent with these Principles, H&M strives to make its value chains gender inclusive. Gauri Agarwal's innovative idea is now being considered by H&M for integration into their supply chains, thus increasing access to domestic and international markets for Sirohi.

The WeEmpowerAsia programme provides training and tools to businesses to implement the Women's Empowerment Principles.

Many signatory companies have conducted gender assessments of their existing programmes and policies, created committees to address sexual harassment at the workplace, and begun implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives. They have also invested in developing a pipeline of qualified women and mentoring them to access leadership roles.

¹International Labour Organization. 2019. "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) - India" ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved on June 15, 2021, accessed through <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TL.F.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>.

²International Labour Organization, 2019. Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved on June 15, 2021, accessed through <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TL.F.CACT.FE.ZS>



GAURI AGRAWAL
Founder, Sirohi.

Photo credit : Dentsu Women
Entrepreneurship Meet, 2019

To date, WeEmpowerAsia has benefitted more than 500 women entrepreneurs in India by equipping them with business and leadership skills and connecting them with funding and learning opportunities. It has also mentored 85 women entrepreneurs to help them adapt their businesses and manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the first and second waves. The majority of these entrepreneurs have successfully pitched their business ideas to investors and some have already secured funding through Agri India Hackathon, HDFC Bank's SmartUp grant, Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) Finblue Program and the German international development agency GIZ.

THE POWER OF WOMEN-LED INNOVATION AND BUSINESS

As the first wave of COVID-19 hit India in 2020, UN Women's WeEmpowerAsia programme and the Government of India's citizen engagement initiative MyGov teamed up to organize the first Shri Shakti ("female power") Challenge. The challenge drew almost 1,300 entries from women entrepreneurs, scientists and change-makers innovating solutions to address the pandemic. After a six-months screening and mentoring process by experts from the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM), 11 finalists developed ground-breaking solutions and three winners were awarded INR 500,000 each.

Gayatri Hela Pamidipati, scientist and Managing Director of Reseda Lifesciences, who won the 2020 Shri Shakti Challenge for developing a non-alcoholic hand sanitizer, explained how the experience helped her: "When I won the initial prize of INR 75,000, we could finally test our product on 600 participants. We found that not only does it sanitize, but also boosts immunity and helps with rashes." Since winning the final award, her company has received global orders for their product and seen a 20 per cent increase in revenue.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE ECOSYSTEM FOR WOMEN IN BUSINESS

UN Women works with the Government of India and the private sector to influence policies that improve the entrepreneurial and employment ecosystem to boost women's participation and leadership in businesses. To recognize

and encourage exemplary gender-responsive business practices, WeEmpowerAsia created the Asia Pacific WEPs Awards in 2020. The Awards, now an annual feature, give women entrepreneurs an opportunity to build networks and exchange ideas. The programme has also engaged companies to address gender stereotypes in advertising and media through India's National Chapter of the Unstereotype Alliance, a global thought and action platform that seeks to eradicate harmful gender-based stereotypes in all media and advertising content. Founding members of the India Chapter include Advertising Agencies Association of India (AAAI), Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), The Advertising Club, Diageo, Havas Group, Hindustan Unilever, Publicis Groupe, Samhita Social Ventures, UNICEF, and WPP India.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Since 2019, the WeEmpowerAsia programme in India has:

- Reached **2000 women micro, small and medium entrepreneurs** to raise awareness about business opportunities. Of these, the programme has delivered training and direct support to more than **400 women entrepreneurs** to improve their business and leadership skills and connected them to investors and markets.
- Secured commitment from **296 private sector companies** to the Women's Empowerment Principles.
- Integrated gender-responsive provisions in the **draft National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights**, working with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.

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