



# LIFE JOURNEYS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERS

Interview summaries for the report,  
**Pathways to Influence:**  
*Promoting the Role of  
Women's Transformative Leadership  
to Achieve the SDGs in Asia  
and the Pacific*

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Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

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### *Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i*

Samoa

“Every setback is an opportunity.”

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### *Byatshandaa Jargal*

Mongolia

“There are always lessons in your experience that can make you stronger.”

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### *Habiba Sarabi*

Afghanistan

“We are working to change the culture of violence to a culture of peace.”

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### *Zhang Haidi*

China

“Even if the wings are broken, the heart is soaring.”

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### *Haseena Khan*

India

“None of us is as strong as all of us.”

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### *Helen Hakena*

Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea

“What keeps me going now is how our women continue to struggle for peace and security in their homes as well as in our country.”

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### *Imrana Jalal*

Fiji

“It is vital to respect cultural forms and protocols while influencing the substance...”

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### *Jeannie E. Javelosa*

Philippines

“Doing what we are truly meant to do in our lives.”

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### *Logeswary Ponniah*

Sri Lanka

“There is nothing that women can't do, especially when they support each other.”

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### *Malika Virdi*

India

“A leader is like a wave that rises when its time comes and subsides to make way for the next.”

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### *Manohari Doss*

India

“When people start to speak up for rights and have respect for themselves...this is exciting and rewarding.”

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### *Maria Fides Bagasao*

Philippines

“Learn from, trust and value the knowledge and capacities of those who are excluded.”

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### *Nazma Akter*

Bangladesh

“Nothing can stop my work to achieve my dream of a safe workplace and equal opportunities for all...”

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### *Pansy Tun Thein*

Myanmar

“We shared a common vision and commitment, learned together and supported each other.”

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### *Raushan Sarsembayeva*

Kazakhstan

“I advise women to take initiative and be active, not to fear to realize their own ideas.”

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### *Shriya Darmani*

India

“At the heart of effective leadership is understanding yourself through self-knowledge and understanding your changing environment.”

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### *Somsook Boonyabancha*

Thailand

“We need to create new political spaces and empower women with the finances and knowledge that can allow them to take more ownership over the processes that influence their lives.”

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### *Tri Rismaharini*

Indonesia

“Politics should be about providing welfare and the tools for fair treatment in society.”

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### *Zolzaya Batkhuyag*

Mongolia

“We need women leaders with quality and impact, not just the numbers in seats.”

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### *Case Study*

“I realize now that I can make a difference. I can help make change.”

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## Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i Samoa

Co-founder and Executive Director of Samoa's Women in Business Development in 1991 and has led the organization for more than 20 years.

Recipient of the global award for economic empowerment from Vital Voices Global Partnership in 2012, presented at the Kennedy Centre in Washington, D.C.

Recipient of the Diane von Furstenberg Award in 2015, presented at the United Nations in New York.<sup>1</sup>

Member of the Order of Samoa, December 2014.

One of the initiators of the Pacific Organic Ethical Trade Community and has assisted other Pacific organizations in becoming organically certified and negotiated their inclusion in world markets.

Former Chair of the Pacific Island Association of Non-Governmental Organizations.

Commonwealth observer group member for the presidential and parliamentary elections in Uganda in 2006.

Civil society representative at the World Economic Forum in 2014–2017.



“Every setback is an opportunity.”

**Noticing what really mattered - creating a vision for local change by and with women<sup>2</sup>**

In 1991, Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i co-founded Samoa's Women in Business Development with a group of Apia-based business women, with a view to support women in business. The focus changed following the devastating cyclones of 1990 and 1991 and the taro leaf blight that obliterated Samoa's staple food and main export crop – taro. The group then began supporting rural women and creating markets to sell their produce. There are many successes over the years with multiple, self-sustaining small business activities

<sup>1</sup> The DVF Awards were created in 2010 by Diane von Furstenberg and the Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation to honour and support extraordinary women.

<sup>2</sup> Those interviewed in Samoa individually or in small groups: Adimaimalaga (Adi) Tafuna'i; Gina Moore, former Samoan Trade Commissioner to New Zealand; Reverend Nu'uausala Siutaia; and from Women in Business Development: Louisa Warner, Production Manager; Salamasina Finau, Finance Manager; Sheree Stehlin, Chair of the Board; Fuimaono Rosalia Me (Fui), Manager, Cultural and Protocol Specialist Special Projects.

flourishing across the country. In total – but not always at the same time – this has involved women and families from more than 183 of Samoa's 362 villages.

Women in Business Development has nurtured certified organic agricultural enterprises and a thriving revitalized mat-weaving industry that annually put more than US\$242,000 (600,000 Samoan tala) into the hands of rural families. These families now have a chance to participate in a cash economy, which means being able to send their children to school, pay their utility bills, contribute to village development and, importantly, to have control over their lives instead of relying on remittances from family members who went abroad. Some families are now earning as much as US\$480 (1,200 tala) a week, often in a family and village where there was nothing before.

In 2016, more than 500 students, equally female and male, graduated from training centres established under the Women in Business Development's Engaging Youth in Samoa in Organic Farming and Menus: A Farm-to-Table Value Chain Approach project. This centres on organic farming practices and climate change and has a strong emphasis on business planning and budgeting. Some go on to work for Women in Business Development. Others have taken steps to obtain organic certification so they can enter the organization's farm-to-table supply chain.

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Each woman brings wider networks that they tap into and use for the women and families they work with.

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A milestone in the organization's development was the redirection of its efforts following the devastation of the two cyclones and the taro crop disease. Tafuna'i led the re-direction to concentrate on immediate needs through village-based women's sustainable development that generated income. Women in Business Development's vision is that

vulnerable families in Samoa are "able to contribute fully to their own development, the development of their community and country through income generation, job creation and participation in the village economy."<sup>3</sup>

Thinking about why she led such a big turnaround, Tafuna'i says it was the vulnerability of village women and the depth of their needs that spurred her. While some of the original urban women members were less interested in this change, the rural need was so overwhelming, it became the compelling focus. A group of women who were strongly committed to this vision stayed with the organization for many years. Fuimaono (Fui) Rosalia Me, the Cultural and Protocol Specialist, for instance, has been with Women in Business Development for more than 20 years. The current chair of the Executive Board has been involved for at least half of the organization's lifetime. They are examples of a team dedicated to turning the vision into reality.

Each woman brings wider networks that they tap into and use for the women and families they work with. Fui, for example has two *matai* (chiefly) titles, uncommon for a woman in Samoa, and brings deep cultural knowledge, connections and respect. Sheree is an Apia-based business owner who is part of the formal and informal business networks, such as the Chamber of Commerce. They also know that they are "there for each other" providing support and wise counsel.

### Foundations for turning the dream into reality

Turning the vision into reality has been a roller-coaster ride, with many highs and lows and has often been a fragile process. Discussions with Tafuna'i, her team and other stakeholders indicate that three core system-change developments lie at the heart of Women in Business Development's

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<sup>3</sup> Samoa's farming system is still largely based on the traditional practice of mixed cropping. Root crops are the most important staple food. Taro, believed to be one of the world's oldest food crops, was traditionally the main root crop of Samoa and was the preferred starchy staple until the cyclones of the 1990s. The impact of the cyclones, followed by the rapid spread of taro leaf blight, resulted in a major decline in production. Taro was once the largest export commodity, generating more than half of all export revenue in 1993. It currently accounts for less than 1 per cent of export revenue.

success. One is the pioneering of organic farming, including introducing, funding and supporting an internationally respected system for organic farming accreditation. The organization took the risk and covered the costs of organic certification in the beginning. This certification, now funded by the Government, gives rural and urban farmers a market edge.

The second is the revitalization of a Samoan cultural tradition undertaken by women – the weaving of very fine mats. Supported by the Prime Minister, who chaired an interagency working group in support, this development is an example of working with and enhancing national culture. “No one really imagined that it would be such a phenomenal success and that Samoan women would once again produce fine mats of such quality,” Fui acknowledges. “Adi led by example and learned how to do fine weaving – even though she is not Samoan herself!”

The third is simultaneously working with farmers to explore, find and develop market opportunities and partnerships – within Samoa and internationally.

Earning a sustainable living in your own backyard has been a substantial part of the Women in Business Development’s approach. This has meant finding simple technologies, such as for coconut oil production, and starting up a locally relevant, microfinance scheme that introduced the women and their families to a banking system. Families have learned how to save and about credit discipline.

Big money is now coming into organic farming. One person interviewed says that people forget that the organization actually started the organic farming movement and infrastructure and took all the risks. Regionally, the organic movement is rolling out in the Pacific with support from the Women in Business Development. Initiatives are now operating in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Timor-Leste. Beyond the Pacific, Women in Business Development has embarked on many partnerships where the small-scale production can fit into the market.

In 2017, the country’s Prime Minister opened the Women in Business Development agri-processing facility and warehouse – a far cry from 1995 when operations were housed in a small, cramped,

airless office that barely accommodated two people. This facility brings together many initiatives and partnerships, exemplifying the changes they have led and nurtured. These include partnerships with The Body Shop and other international buyers; the youth employment project; and a farm-to-table supply guarantee system that provides capacity and consistency across the value chain – from the certified organic farmers to restaurant owners and managers.

### **Leadership approach a vital factor in the organization’s success**

Tafuna’s specific leadership approach has been critically important in the success of Women in Business Development. All colleagues interviewed described her as an enabler who has, through her leadership, shown families and churches how to support women and men to generate income from village resources, such as coconut oil. Tafuna’s openness to learning and her embracing of Samoan culture have been central in this respect. An invaluable learning has been the importance of wider family (*aiga*) support for the development of economic independence by women.

Partners, staff and others interviewed described Tafuna as someone who builds a team and leads by example, combining humility, vision and perseverance. They use words such as integrity, walks the talk, does what she says, never runs down people, is firm, flexible, considerate, deals with challenges positively and sees the opportunities within them. She brings people with her and they are motivated by feeling that their voice and work is valued, says one staff member. “She is always reaching out. If she is unsure, she always asks other people’s opinions. She is not afraid to be out on a limb and is a role model – especially for younger women,” another staff member adds.

Colleagues and friends also commented on Women in Business Development’s adaptability and willingness to seize an opportunity as a hallmark of Tafuna’s leadership. “We didn’t set out to be a market arm,” says Tafuna. “It all happened through coconut oil. We had originally approached local businesses to be marketers of organic coconut oil. We would have preferred



another organization to do this, but there was no interest. The only way forward I could see was to personally set up a business and commit our own family money in order to receive a commercial loan. Women in Business Development, as an NGO, wasn't eligible. We are no longer operating this way, but it provided the short-term solution to help build the market connections for small farmers."

### **Values and integrity as core drivers of the leadership journey**

Tafuna'I traces her leadership approach back to her childhood in Fiji and the influential role of her hard-working father, who made sure that his own brothers and sisters were financially looked after, and her mother, who always had an open-door approach to anyone and everyone. She is clear that being "true to yourself", your own values and always being open to learning are fundamental. She has found it useful to not look for big results but to take "small, simple steps, slow and sure" on the way to realizing her vision.

Early work experience for Tafuna'I as a local manager in Samoa with the United States Peace Corps provided another important leadership stepping stone, introducing her to networks that are still strong across the Pacific as well as to effective organizational development approaches. Some specific gender and development initiatives were particularly helpful, especially the early and ongoing financial support from the New Zealand Government and Oxfam New Zealand through a women's development programme.

Equally valuable have been broader professional development learning opportunities, such as the Graduate Diploma in Not-for-Profit Management offered by New Zealand's Unitec. This, Tafuna'I says, has helped build the skills of many NGO leaders across the Pacific who share values, an analysis of the context they are working within and are part of an informal network of support. Within Samoa, there is an informal group of women leaders who provide a valuable network of mutual support – and Tafuna'I's long-time close colleagues in Women in Business Development continue to be a major source of support and inspiration.

As Tafuna'I and the staff and Executive Board see it, for every challenge there has been an enabler. Sometimes, this has been individuals – advisors, funders, government officials, pastors, *matai* (chiefs) and overseas volunteers – who have really understood the vision and found ways to help and walk alongside. Often, they have gone the extra mile and opened doors for the organization and thus for women and small farmers in Samoa.

### **Challenges on the journey: Every setback is an opportunity**

The 25-year road has been paved by multiple practical, systems and other challenges. "I could have given up so many times," says Tafuna'I, "but every setback is an opportunity. Just when the doors seem closed, an opportunity or act of generosity came along. For example, when we were in despair and funding was running very low, a German gentleman interested in traditional cures purchased a tonne of coconut oil and donated US\$5,000 to [the organization]. This injected just the right amount of money for us to continue."

Many of the challenges over the quarter century could broadly be called cultural but not in the sense of ethnic culture. They are more to do with individual and group behaviour and expectations of different entities, for example funders, when something new and untried is being introduced. Practical challenges have included seemingly simple things, such as finding the right equipment for extracting coconut oil that will work at the small scale needed or finding a system of payment to farmers that can work. Women in Business Development now requires that all producers have a bank account to track finances – made easier with better Internet access.

Navigating prevailing gender norms has also been a challenge. In the beginning, some husbands saw the fine mat production as a problem because it took their wives away from their usual household duties, even though they were earning income. There were increased cases of domestic violence. The organization worked with the families, and when the value of what the women were doing became clear, the men's behaviour changed.



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Finding ways to keep farmers involved and loyal when the financial returns aren't immediate, an approach doesn't work or others undercut agreements has been another issue for Tafuna'i and her team. When a certain approach to exporting green bananas didn't pan out, for example, the team worked with the farmers to dry the bananas in a way that kept taste and quality and could find entry into an established market.

Building the connections between local production and domestic and international markets has been challenging and often required multiple approaches. This has included finding the right advisers who truly have the interests of Samoa and Women in Business Development's role at heart. Some persons, for example, have tried to claim intellectual property rights inappropriately.

Being an early innovator and an NGO meant that Women in Business Development was often seen as being not part of the mainstream and therefore could be easily ignored by business and government advisers. While "people have come around as [the organization] has become more successful ... there can also be jealousy," says Tafuna'i.

Managing the tension between being an NGO and creating a business, before the term social enterprise was widely used, created significant challenges tensions. Some are still to be resolved, such as when funding for core operational costs should be replaced by earnings from sales to cover those costs. Within the organization, particularly in the early days, recruiting and retaining good-quality staff, who viewed the vision and work of the organization as more than just any job, was difficult. Under Tafuna'i's leadership, they have developed an organizational approach of openness, equality, professional development for staff and fairness. This approach is clearly paying off today.

## Partnerships and government policy

Development that really empowers women to be economically independent and small farmers to be sustainably earning is at the centre of the vision of what Tafuna'i and Women in Business Development have for the role of the Samoan Government and other partners. Effective partnerships are crucial to realizing this vision. "A woman, a family, a small farmer, Women in Business Development, government, businesses and funders cannot each do it on their own," says Tafuna'i. She welcomes the "new breed" of government officials being appointed who understand sustainable development, the place of small-scale rural initiatives and the role of Women in Business Development.

There are significant opportunities to connect sustainable development research to rural communities that normally do not get such benefits. Government agencies can help facilitate such links. They can also assist to make the breakthrough connections between producers and markets, building (for example) on the success of the farm-to-table initiative in linking organic farming with market opportunities.

While valuing the support of international partners, Tafuna'i also observes that funders sometimes come with fixed ideas or pre-packaged approaches. For example, one international funder brought with them a particular approach to microfinance that didn't suit Samoan culture and family organization. Women in Business Development tried to make it work but eventually left the initiative, which meant losing funding. Other funders have been keen to see Women in Business Development scale up, even though the model is unlikely to work in a country of dispersed villages where simple, locally usable technology is vital.

**Byatshandaa Jargal**  
Mongolia

Founder and President of the Mongolian Women Farmers Association, a volunteer-led NGO.

Recipient of the Women's World Summit Foundation Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life, in 2003, for combating malnutrition.

Nominated for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize as part of the 1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize project.

Holds a Master of Science in Agronomy from the University in Hovt, Mongolia.



**“There are always lessons in your experience that can make you stronger.”**

**From rural poverty to national influence**

Byatshandaa Jargal understands what it is to be poor and to struggle. Born into a nomadic herder family in Mongolia's remote north, her mother died when she was at secondary school. Despite having the responsibility to bring up five younger brothers and sisters, as well as her own four children later, she managed to obtain her master's degree in agronomy and established the influential Mongolian Women Farmers Association, which is now transforming the lives and prospects of thousands of people, particularly women. In the context of the time, the establishment of the Women Farmers Association as an independent volunteer-led organization was in itself also a transformative step.

With the traditional diet consisting mainly of meat, dairy products and flour, most Mongolians have no experience of vegetable growing. Jargal saw potential to improve livelihoods for families and create employment opportunities by supporting people to plant vegetables on their own land. In 1999, she founded the Women Farmers Association to promote vegetable growing and small-scale farming. The organization specifically supports the most marginalized, poorest members of society, including impoverished single mothers, through training, advisory and mentoring support. In addition to the growing and sale of vegetables, the Women Farmers Association provides training and technical support for the planting and care of fruit trees and other vegetation to combat desertification.

An important part of the background to the creation of the Women Farmers Association was the country's transition during the late 1980s and early 1990s from a centrally planned economy to the market economy. It was a time of uncertainty, high unemployment and an increase in social issues related to alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Families would often be forced to eat their crop seeds to survive. Despite high economic growth rates, 21.6 per cent of the population still lives below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup>

### **Green pathway to improved livelihoods and nutrition**

An important impetus for the creation of the Women Farmers Association was Jargal's role in the formulation and initiation of a green revolution programme for Mongolia, which was adopted by the Government in 1987. Many poor families were left out of the programme, especially those headed by women. This marginalized part of the population became the focus of the organizing and training efforts of the Women Farmers Association.

In the 18 years since establishing the Women Farmers Association, Jargal's visionary initiative has opened up a green pathway to improved livelihoods and nutrition for more than 10,000 people across the country. When it first started, those supported by the association (80 per cent of whom were women) had no money to buy seeds.

<sup>4</sup> Asia Development Bank (2017). Available at <https://www.adb.org/countries/mongolia/poverty>.

In time, with the income they generated from growing vegetables, they were able to enhance the quality of the family diet and generate income from selling surplus produce to help pay school fees, fees for medical services and investment in household assets, including cars, wells, mobile phones and computers.<sup>5</sup>

Asia Foundation data show that the average incomes of participating families increased by 12.1 per cent. They also saved money because they no longer needed to purchase vegetables for their own consumption. Cooperatives were established by family members to support each other in their business ventures. In fields where the vegetables were planted, the yield per hectare increased three to four times. The construction of cellars now allows families to store harvested vegetables during Mongolia's long, cold winters.

Many women formed their own NGOs, that became part of the Women Farmers Association. Around 50 per cent of seedling sellers nationwide has now been trained by the Association. The increased economic empowerment of the women involved encouraged many to take on more active roles in their community and in the family. In one case, a trainee supported by the Association became a trainer then moved on to become the deputy governor of her province.

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A further indication of the association's influence has been a reduction in domestic violence. "When women became active in producing and selling vegetables," says Jargal, "men were drawn in to assist, establishing stronger family relationships

<sup>5</sup> See Asia Foundation (2006). Available at <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MGMWFAresearcheng.pdf>.

and mutual benefits, which reduced the likelihood of violence.”

### **Influencing national policies and capacities**

Building on its growing base and experience, the Women Farmers Association has influenced national government legislation and policies in several areas critical to the population’s long-term health and prosperity. These include the revision of Law on Food (for which Jargal was an adviser), the Law on Family (which includes government subsidies for small-scale farmers) and the Law on Domestic Violence. Jargal and the Women Farmers Association are now working with the Mongolian Farmers for Rural Development Organization to develop a national vegetable farming programme.

The Women Farmers Association has three training centres: in Bayankhoshuu (a ger<sup>6</sup> area in the western part of Ulaanbaatar), Bayanzurkh (a ger area in the eastern part of Ulaanbaatar) and Bayankhonger (the capital of Bayanhongor Province in the south). The centres train about 500–600 households a year and provide follow-up advice. Trainees receive seed packets to get them started and, in some cases, a plot of land in a community farm. Otherwise, they farm in the land around their home.

A focus of the association’s approach is the training of trainers who then train others, spreading vegetable growing and livelihoods skills and knowledge more widely among the population.<sup>7</sup>

As well as still serving as President of the Association, Jargal runs a soup kitchen for poor women and children, offers training on health, nutrition and basic life skills and teaches local handicrafts products for generating income. Other achievements have included a three-year vocational course in small-scale farming for youth; a national TV programme on small-scale farming broadcast weekly and producing two books on vegetable growing. Jargal has been sponsored to other countries, ranging from Ireland to China, to share her lessons and experience.

<sup>6</sup> Traditional Mongolian tent dwelling.

<sup>7</sup> See Asia Foundation (2006). Available at <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MGMWFAresearcheng.pdf>.

### **Big impact from small beginnings**

The nationwide vegetable revolution that Jargal has sparked came from small beginnings. She produced the initial 1,000 packets of cabbage seeds and instructions personally by hand. From the first income as the result of the sale of the cabbage seeds came funds to support the growth of the Women Farmers Association. Jargal obtained a plot of land and established a demonstration and training farm. She later obtained more land and established a community garden, where every year, 400 poor families are provided with small plots and are trained to grow vegetables.

Jargal highlights a number of factors to the success of the Women Farmers Association: having a clear vision; a collective leadership approach; the commitment of the women involved; a methodology based on needs assessments, long-term planning and regular monitoring; and learning continuously from experience and adapting accordingly. When the Association began to teach other livelihood skills to the members, such as sewing and tailoring, they found themselves “overloaded”. As a result, they refocused their efforts on improving nutrition and livelihoods by growing and marketing vegetables and fruit. When the Association’s initial strategy to work with individual households proved challenging, they shifted their approach to working with groups of households.

As the influence and profile of the Association grew, international support increased, including important partnerships with The Asia Foundation, the Swiss Development Cooperation Agency and a Korean environmental NGO, which is now supporting a tree planting campaign to combat desertification.

### **Poor background a driver into her leadership role**

Jargal points to her experience of poverty and hardship as a core driver in her life’s work. “This background gave me character and determination,” she says. “It motivated me to help those who are poor and marginalized.”

The continuous collective support over the years of the core group of leaders within the Women



Farmer Association is another enabler of Jargal's leadership role and resilience. The Association's Management Board consists of seven women and two men. At one point, Jargal stood down from her role as president to create an opportunity for others, with the intention of remaining active as a mentor and adviser. "However, it is not so easy now to encourage younger women to take over leadership roles as more tend to look for financial compensation," she says.

The support of her immediate family is another critical factor, with her husband an active partner in the work. "My hard-working and caring parents also provided early role models for me," she says.

Jargal's agronomy training and past professional experience as official extension officer also contributed to her influence and impact, strengthening her confidence and providing essential knowledge directly relevant to the urgent needs of people and policy processes within Government.

### **Building hope and opportunities to address ongoing challenges**

In developing the Women Farmers Association and building its influence and outreach, Jargal had many deep challenges to overcome. The entrenched gender norms of Mongolia meant that poor women with whom she worked needed close support to build confidence to embark on a non-traditional livelihood pathway.

"There is an old Mongolian saying that 'women belong to the house and men belong to the State'," she says. "As a result, male members of the household often didn't accept what we were doing in the beginning. But attitudes changed as they saw benefits for the family, including themselves."

Traditional attitudes also meant that government processes were often not "women friendly," and women wanting to start small businesses could not get bank loans without the signature of their husband.

Access to leadership opportunities at the national level was also restricted to women without access to resources to "buy their way to the top" as well as family connections and party connections.

But in particular, it is "poverty of the mind, poverty of spirit, poverty of inspiration and motivation" that denies leadership opportunities to women, argues Jargal. "We must keep building hope and opportunities." She encourages younger women who are emerging as leaders to "not give up – there are always lessons in your experience that can make you stronger."

### **Government can help open space for women leaders**

There is much that the government can do to create the opportunities and space that women need to grow as leaders, says Jargal. "Systematic leadership training, beginning with girls at school, would make a big difference."

Another area needing attention is ensuring that civil society organizations, such as her own, can flourish and grow, including through more transparent and open links between state organizations and non-state organizations, which are a relatively new phenomena in Mongolia. The Government is central by ensuring that appropriate policy and legislative frameworks are in place to recognize and support the growing role of civil society organizations, she says. "Our shared commitment to the [Sustainable Development Goals] can provide an important platform for working together with the Government, as well as with other organizations and countries."

## Habiba Sarabi Afghanistan

One of the Deputy Chairpersons of the Afghan High Peace Council.

Adviser on Women's Affairs and Youth to Afghanistan Government Chief Executive Officer.

Afghanistan's first woman provincial governor from 2005 to 2013.

Former Minister of Women's Affairs.

Former General Manager of the Afghan Institute of Learning in Peshawar.

Former Vice-President of Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan.

Conducted research in the field of haematology on a scholarship funded by the World Health Organization in India.

Named *Time* magazine's Hero of the Environment in 2008.

Recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2013 in recognition of services and good governance (considered Asia's Nobel Prize).

Recipient of the United Nations N-PEACE Award in 2017, in the Untold Story category. This award recognizes advocates in Asia who work to advance women, peace and security issues.



“We are working to change the culture of violence to a culture of peace.”

### **Journey from refugee to national leader**

Born in Mazari Sharif, Sarabi spent her youth traveling around the country with her father. She later moved to Kabul to attend high school and study pharmacy at university. After graduating, she was awarded a scholarship by the World Health Organization and moved to India for research in the field of haematology.

Sarabi's leadership journey had its roots in the period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. She was teaching at a nursing college when a group of Taliban occupied the campus compound. “I had to stay home. Women suffered greatly in this period. We had no rights, to work or even go out of the





home. But we had also suffered greatly in the previous periods of conflict, going back to 1978.”

With her three children, Sarabi fled to Peshawar in Pakistan in 1996. “I wanted to make sure that my daughter in the fifth grade could continue her education.” A fervent advocate for girls’ education, she started secretly teaching in refugee camps, returned discretely to Afghanistan to teach, started an organization for mothers and became engaged with political issues. Feeling responsible to help raise the voices of Afghan women in other countries, Sarabi later campaigned in Europe, gathering support to assist the secret underground schools that had been set up in private homes in Afghanistan. In 1998, she joined the Afghan Institute of Learning and eventually became the General Manager of the entire organization. She was also Vice-President of Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan. One initiative that Sarabi was particularly proud of was a school for displaced people to learn carpet weaving and other skills, in addition to the school curriculum up to the fifth-grade level. “Many of these students have since gone on to be teachers and economists,” she says.

After an emergency *loya jirga* (Pashto for “grand assembly”) in Kabul in June 2002, called for by the international community under the Bonn Agreement, a transitional administration was established to rebuild the government, with Hamid Karzai as President. Sarabi was subsequently appointed as Minister of Women’s Affairs before being selected as Governor of Bamyan Province in 2005 – a historic appointment in the Afghanistan context. Bamyan is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped provinces of Afghanistan, with high rates of illiteracy and poverty.

She prioritized tourism as a source of income. “As governor, it was important to be acting for the whole population and for the position itself,” she says. This meant having to strive for balance between different political and ethnic interests, including managing two major crises in which identity politics and differences were prominent. Sarabi continued to be instrumental in promoting women’s rights and representation as well as environmental issues. *Time* magazine named her a Hero of the Environment in 2008 for her role in establishing the Band-e Amir National Park in Bamyan.

In the 2014 national elections, Sarabi campaigned on a vice-presidential ticket among youth and educated women, which represented a shift in Afghanistan’s political life. After the elections, she was appointed Adviser on Women’s Affairs and Youth to Afghanistan Chief Executive, Abdullah.

Sarabi was an active voice within the Afghan women’s networks for what became the Violence Against Women Law. She currently serves as a Vice-Chair of the High Peace Council, in which she represents women activists. The role of the High Peace Council is to build national consensus, mobilize local initiatives, monitor implementation of peace agreements, build local capacity for implementing and promoting a culture of peace. Important reforms were made to the Council in 2016, with one of the five vice-chair roles now reserved for a woman as the result of lobbying by women’s groups. Five of the 20 members of its Executive Board are now women, and there are 12 women among the 63 members in the High Peace Council’s General Assembly. Sarabi also chairs the Women, Youth and Civil Society Committee of the High Peace Council.

In the quest for peace within the country, Sarabi initiated Mothers of Peace, a national women’s network. It began in nine provinces to promote voluntary “from the heart” campaigning for sustainable peace and aims to cover the whole country by 2020. “We are working to change the culture of violence to a culture of peace,” says Sarabi. “Culturally, people are feeling very violated. We want to change the mindset of people on the ground, where mothers have a vital role to play. Our strategy is to work bottom-up, community by community, province by province.”

### **Drawing deeply on cultural understanding and respect**

Sarabi’s leadership approach has been informed by both her work on women’s rights and environmental advocacy as well as her identity as an Afghan Hazara. While Bamyan is known to be one of the more liberal regions of Afghanistan, with greater numbers of girls attending school, politics remains a male-dominated world. As provincial governor, Sarabi drew upon her understanding of Hazaragi culture and customs to promote progress for women within the community. “Afghan

societies are very traditional. Hence, I respect and leverage those elements of Afghan tradition that don't deprive women of their rights and don't affect them negatively.... I try to back my efforts with those traditions of our societies that are favourable for women. For instance, I have established good relationships with the Imams and religious and tribal leaders using religious texts to substantiate and justify my work for women."

### **From family to the international women's movement**

Sarabi explains that the need to respond to injustice has been a major motivation throughout her leadership journey. "If I see that people are denied the right to do certain things, this becomes a motivation to do something positive to change the situation," she says.

Her early experience of gender-based domestic violence had a significant influence on her life, exposing her at a young age to both the abuse often targeted towards women as well as the importance of championing for the rights of women. "[My mother] continued suffering from violence until she passed away. The violence committed against her impacted my life, too.... I was very much influenced by the life of my mother, who I believe turned me into a fighter and a women's rights activist."

"My mother also had great interest in my education," she remembers. "She encouraged me to go to school to become literate, at least. She would have never expected me to become minister or governor. She wasn't able to read herself, so she asked me to read her the letters that she occasionally received from her brothers."

Other factors also encouraged Sarabi in her various leadership roles. Important among them is the support and inspiration of her husband, an uncle who encouraged her to study and a multitude of women activists, leaders and networks across Afghanistan and internationally.

The implementation in 2005 of mandatory quotas reserving a quarter of all parliamentary seats and more than 30 per cent of provincial council

seats for women provided enabling impetus for Sarabi's leadership journey. She was able to take advantage of that opportunity to participate in the formal political system in Afghanistan. "Being a woman and coming from a minority group were the two factors that helped me snatch the opportunity that was created and get into the reserved seat in the Cabinet as per the quota."

Sarabi has experienced numerous challenges along her pathway to leadership. In addition to the violence she witnessed at home and the conflict in the country of her youth, there was poverty and limited access to education. Raised in a lower-middle class family, Sarabi experienced times of economic insecurity. In her early life, poverty was one of the barriers to her accessing education. "While I was still in education, poverty was the biggest obstacle to my progress in receiving higher education." As Sarabi progressed in her studies, other barriers appeared in the form of limited higher educational courses provided in her areas of interest. Now she is an ardent advocate for increasing the availability of scholarships that allow young women to access opportunities at home and abroad that would otherwise never be available to them.

### **Working together around common goals and respecting cultural differences**

Sarabi highlights a number of lessons for emerging women leaders from her leadership experience in the Afghanistan context. First and foremost is the need to work together around common goals. There is an Afghan saying, begins Sarabi, that "if both sides pull the rope, it will tear apart. If both sides give a little bit, a rope will stay intact. Meaning, we can achieve balance with give and take."

Closely related to this approach is the importance of being culturally respectful and appropriate.

"Women working for change should be careful not to impose their rules on the community," she says. "It is important to both understand and respect different customs and approaches and to analyse the actual needs and process on the ground." But this is not easy, Sarabi cautions.

Women standing for election still face physical pressure to stand down. “While respecting the diverse cultures in Afghanistan, we have to explain why gender equality is better for children, families, for everybody,” she says.

Sarabi highlights the importance of winning and expanding allies. Although the support of women’s networks is crucial, it is also important to develop allies among men, where changing mindsets can help to influence other men. “Men are raised to be kings in our society, so this can be a challenge. We have to be patient and strategic and think about how to remove obstacles in ways that bring people with us,” she advises.

It is also important for women leaders to take care of themselves and each other, she adds. “My advice is to run slowly, to pace yourself and look after your own sustainability. If we run too fast, we may tumble over.”

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Although the support of women’s networks is crucial, it is also important to develop allies among men, where changing mindsets can help to influence other men.

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## Indications of a different future are emerging

Sarabi’s daughter, Naheed Sarabi, who was able to complete her education, now has degrees in economics and development management and serves as the Deputy Minister of Finance for Policy. “This experience shows the possibilities for the future,” says Sarabi. “It is what we have been working towards for so long, and now we are seeing a growing number of young women leaders emerging across the country in many different roles and sectors, including in business as entrepreneurs and in chambers of commerce”. Government leaders at all levels are essential for increasing the momentum of such changes, she adds. “They can make a difference by lending support and making space for women’s initiatives. This can help to show what is possible.”

For young women leaders beginning their leadership journey in Afghanistan, where discriminatory social norms remain all pervasive, Sarabi encourages a focus on strengthening and maintaining self-confidence while also understanding the cultural context within which they are working. “My message for them is to keep on working to empower themselves and build self-confidence, respecting their culture and making the optimal use of the opportunities they get. Most importantly, they should work to earn people’s confidence in them. Never give up fighting for your rights. Show persistence and perseverance in your work in the face of all the challenges and support each other so that you can make the difference you are striving for.”

## Zhang Haidi

China

Chair of China Disabled Persons' Federation since 2008.

President of Rehabilitation International, an almost century-old NGO that empowers people with disabilities and provides sustainable solutions towards achieving a more inclusive society.

Executive President of Beijing Organizing Committee of the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

Member of the Standing Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Member of the National Committee of the Chinese Writers' Association.

Asia-Pacific Disability Rights Champions Award in 2012.

Honorary Doctorate, York University, UK in 2013.

Honorary Doctorate, University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA in 2015.

Nationally renowned role model and author.



**“Even if the wings are broken, the heart is soaring.”**

### **Role model and influence for hundreds of millions of people**

Zhang Haidi was afflicted with angioma at the age of 5 and became paralyzed from the chest down. In the 1980s, she became a national role model of tenacity and proactivity. Elementary school children in China used to read about her life story in their textbooks. She has inspired millions of persons with disabilities.

Being unable to attend school due to her disability, Zhang taught herself the curriculum from primary school to the bachelor's degree level and then obtained a master's degree in philosophy from Jilin University. She became fluent in several foreign languages, including English, Japanese and German. She published several novels and essays and became a translator and nationally

recognized author. At the age of 15, Zhang also taught herself acupuncture and medical care and used her skills to help people in need in rural areas. Her experiences and achievements are widely known in China.

Zhang has leveraged her public profile and experience to promote the rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities across China, becoming Chair of the China Disabled Persons' Federation in 2008 and a member of the Standing Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Her efforts have contributed to many tangible changes in the position of persons with disabilities in China and are now extending internationally through her role as President of Rehabilitation International.

### **Showing a nation that people with disabilities can drive themselves**

A particular focus of Zhang's advocacy efforts has been to allow persons with disabilities in China the opportunity to drive a motor vehicle. In 2009, the Government finally adopted a policy allowing people with disabilities to obtain a driving license. Zhang also led in promoting this policy, learning how to drive a modified car and encouraging others.

The nationwide introduction of allowances for persons with disabilities is another major outcome of her advocacy. In 2016, the State Council adopted a life allowance and nursing subsidy system, which to date has benefited more than 21 million financially challenged persons with disabilities and persons with severe disabilities. These initiatives not only opened up a new world to persons with disabilities but also provided useful support for the families.

Advancing inclusive education is another major milestone in Zhang's lifelong efforts. The university entrance exam is one of the most important life moments for generations of people in China. Having the opportunity to study in a top university is a monumental turning point for a person with disability. Zhang successfully advocated for the necessary facilitation measures to enable students with disabilities to chase their dreams. For example, examinees with visual impairment

can use large print or Braille test papers; those without arms can bring their own tailor-made desk and chair; and those having cerebral palsy can apply for time extension. In 2018 alone, more than 10,000 Chinese students were enrolled into regular institutions of higher education.

The establishment of a university of rehabilitation is another major innovation that has resulted from Zhang's efforts. "For persons with disabilities, rehabilitation is the key to reshape their lives," she says. Her proposal was adopted by the Government, and the country's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) included provision for such an institution. In June 2019, China launched the establishment of the university.

Children and women with disabilities, who often face more barriers than men with disabilities, are high on Zhang's priority list. She advised the Government to deliver early interventions that respond to the urgent needs of infants and children younger than 6 years, which now gives many children with hearing impairment or cerebral palsy rehabilitation opportunities. She has also directed attention to the sexual and reproductive rights of women, hoping more of her disabled sisters can marry, with love, dignity and equality and give birth by taking advantage of advancing technology.

The availability of up-to-date and reliable data is imperative to the development, implementation and monitoring of such policy and programme initiatives. Due to the size of China's population and territory, generating such data is a major challenge. In 2015, Zhang had a leading role in the launching of a major exercise to compile statistics on the status of disability in China, mobilizing 1.5 million volunteers to collect more than 40 items of essential information, including types of disability and work preferences. More than 33 million of an estimated 85 million disabled persons are recorded in the database as a result of the exercise, the first comprehensive such database in the world. Zhang urges other governments to establish similar databases of persons with disabilities, opening the possibility of international comparisons and joint efforts as well as strengthening the basis for realization of the Sustainable Development Goals' commitment to "leave no one behind".

Her influence reaches far beyond China. After taking office as President of Rehabilitation

International in 2016 (which is based in New York though she remains in China), Zhang adopted a series of initiatives that brought new vitality to the almost century-old organization. Under her leadership, Rehabilitation International set up the Global Disability Development Fund and the Africa Fund to support disability-related projects. In 2019, Rehabilitation International established an Award for Outstanding Achievements. By recognizing individuals and organizations that have made outstanding contributions to the work for people with disabilities, the award is intended to promote the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals and advance the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities globally.

With her years of leadership experience, Zhang is acutely aware that more effective collaboration among governments, international organizations and disability organizations is essential to disability-inclusive development. Thus, she has proposed a World Disability Organization as an agency under the United Nations to better serve the one billion persons with disabilities in the world.

### **Love, humanity and passion make a leader**

Before she became Chair of the China Disabled Persons' Federation, Zhang had shown her leadership qualities as a rural health worker. Leadership is not something you are born with, she contends. "It needs time to form and cultivate, building continuously even on small experiences, such as treating patients in rural areas and encouraging them to fight against diseases." Zhang's leadership approach has continued to develop over more than 30 years of engagement with the rights of persons with disabilities, at home and abroad.

Reflecting on her own experience, Zhang observes that women in leadership should value and draw on their feminine qualities, valuing tenderness, empathy and showing emotion. As a senior leader now, Zhang continues to be a role model through her gentle and considerate leadership style. She refuses to adopt what are considered to be male characteristics to demonstrate authority and influence. After 11 years as Chair of the China

Disabled Persons' Federation, Zhang's passion for life and selfless dedication continue through her leadership to unite colleagues and build an effective team in the service of persons with disabilities. "A person with passion will love life, be determined to live better," she says. "Even if the wings are broken, the heart is soaring." Underpinning all that she does is Zhang's own experience and learnings as a person with disabilities who has overcome many challenges and lived a full and active life in every respect. "We must keep ourselves graceful, despite our disabilities," she says.

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Women in leadership should value and draw on their feminine qualities, valuing tenderness, empathy and showing emotion

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### **Leadership begins with family**

Her family, she says, created an environment "full of love and harmony" that provided the basis for fulfilment through engagement in advancing the rights for women, girls and persons with disabilities. Her parents were both artists. They often read novels to Zhang and took her to ballet performances. When she was young, her mother inspired her with the stories of another influential role model, Lin Qiaozhi, a famous female obstetrician and gynaecologist in China. From her parents, Zhang gained the confidence, inner strength, optimism, idealism and compassion that both drove and defined her leadership approach, shaping her as "a meteor, giving its light to the world despite its transience".

Zhang's husband of 37 years, Wang Zuoliang, is another foundation of her life and influence. "He is not only my husband but also my elder brother, closest friend, classmate and colleague. He gives me strength and supports me in all I do," she says. When Zhang was diagnosed with basal cell carcinoma in 1991, Zuoliang willed her to survive



an operation without anaesthesia, saying that “it is you who gives me new enthusiasm and vitality every day”.

### **Being one of the few poses challenges in a leadership role**

On top of the many challenges she has confronted and overcome as a woman with disability, Zhang says it can be lonely as a leader. Despite the advances for women in recent decades in China, there are still relatively few opportunities for women to participate in political life. Thus, there are few prominent women leaders who can draw on each other for support. And many gender-related inequalities remain unaddressed as well.

Even though Zhang has never participated in a women’s leadership training programme, she strongly encourages women to take every such opportunity that might arise to enhance their confidence and skills to thus expand the pool of emerging women leaders in China. Also critical to opening up the pathways for women’s leadership are passion, the cutting-edge knowledge that can come from access to higher education opportunities and perseverance. “It is the way of life that everyone will encounter difficulties and setbacks. Once you beat them, you are the hero,” she says.

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Also critical to opening up the pathways for women’s leadership are passion, the cutting-edge knowledge that can come from access to higher education opportunities and perseverance.

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### **Maximizing the role model effect**

Zhang calls upon the world’s governments for more efforts and resources to help bring greater profile to inspiring examples of women in leadership who are transforming lives and futures in whichever sphere they are active.

She highlights the role that international agencies and platforms have in helping create new leadership pathways for women at home and abroad, including by providing leadership development opportunities and resources to support women’s organizations and networking.



## Haseena Khan India

Founder and leader of Bebaak Collective, a national umbrella organization of Muslim women's groups in India.

Leading figure in successful case before the Supreme Court of India to strike down the "triple *talaq*", which allowed a Muslim man to get instantaneous divorce by saying "divorce" three times.

Active as a grass-roots feminist activist and campaigner on communalization and violence against women in the Indian women's movement for more than three decades.

Member of Awaaz-e-Niswaan (the Voice of Women) in Mumbai.

Elected to the Ashoka Fellowship in 2000.



**“None of us is as strong as all of us.”**

### **30 years campaigning bears important fruit<sup>8</sup>**

In August 2017, the Supreme Court of India struck down the "triple *talaq*", the practice whereby a Muslim man can instantaneously divorce his wife just by saying "divorce" three times. Widely regarded as a significant step forward for women's rights in India, the decision culminated in the outlawing of the triple *talaq* with the passing of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill in July 2019.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to the input of Haseena Khan, this profile drew on the following sources: Ashoka, *Everyone a Changemaker* (Delhi, 2000). Available at <https://www.ashoka.org/en/fellow/haseena-khan>; Haseena Khan, "30 years of ending 'instant divorce' is a victory: But Indian women have a fight ahead", *UK Guardian*, 25 August 2017; Haseena Khan, (10 August 2016). My freedom to demonstrate: 'When the state is against you, the street gives you power', *India Today*, 10 August 2016; Ankita Ramgopal, "The invisible lawyer", *Lawyers Collective*, 1 September 2017.

This hard-won outcome is the result of decades of work by many Muslim women across India, but none more so than Haseena Khan, founder of the Bebaak Collective, a national umbrella body of Muslim women's rights groups. "We've been fighting for this particular cause for almost 30 years – people are rejoicing with the victory," Khan told a journalist after the Supreme Court decision. "Women are becoming politically conscious, aware of their rights. The implications of the judgment are already being witnessed. We've already heard of instances where *maulanas* [religious authorities] have refused granting triple *talaq* to husbands after the passing of judgment, so the effects can already be seen."

Outside and beyond the courts, despite vociferous opposition, this case brought the conversations on women's rights into mainstream public debate. This was a welcome shift from the usually deafening silence on inequality within the institutions of marriage and family, says Khan.

The focus of her life's work – India's 90 million Muslim women – remain in many cases among the least literate, most disadvantaged, poorest and least represented within India's population. They have limited opportunities for personal independence and have minimal access to resources. They do not have any rights over their matrimonial or natal homes. This status is reinforced by laws, such as the Muslim Women's Bill (1986), which subordinates the rights of Muslim women to the demands of community identity, denying them constitutional rights as Indian citizens; and the Muslim Personal Law, which controls all aspects of the personal lives of Muslim women (until recently, including through the triple *talaq* provision). Custody and guardianship laws are also biased against women, she adds.

As well as combating fundamentalism in the Muslim community, Khan was involved in working to end and resist communal violence in the 1992–1993 riots in Mumbai in which around 700 people died following the destruction by Hindu nationalist organizations of the Babri Masjid Mosque in the city of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh State. Standing up to extremist nationalist views and actions has been another focus of Khan's life and work.

## From humble beginnings to national influence

Khan's leadership journey began in a Muslim-dominated ghetto in Bhendi Bazaar, Mumbai, where most families are staunchly religious and conservative. For women in these poverty-stricken families, their world begins and ends within the immediate community. After her father gambled away the family's money, Khan's mother worked as a maid and seamstress to send her children to school. Life changed for her when her brother went to work in a Gulf State. With the additional income, she could continue school, even though her sisters had by then dropped out. When these resources were lost after her brother's return, Khan supported her education by tutoring children and seeking donations, discounts and free books. Illness, pressure at home from a family that did not prioritize education, lack of money and hours spent supporting her family did not prevent Khan from completing her education.

In the meantime, a catalytic opportunity that shaped her future stood across the street from the family home. This was the headquarters of the Awaaz-e-Niswan, the first Muslim women's group to challenge the Muslim Personal Law and the organization in which Khan would one day become an active member. The organization's head at that time, Shehnaaz Shaikh, became Khan's mentor and her guide in life. Khan was introduced to the city beyond her immediate community, to books outside her syllabus, to music and film and to the social and cultural life that Muslim girls seldom enjoy. Working with Awaaz-e-Niswan beginning in 1985, Khan also became aware of issues that influence the lives of women in general and Muslim women in particular. The local religious court unsuccessfully tried to persuade her family to stop her from going to work.

Through her role in Awaaz-e-Niswan Khan earned a reputation as a problem-solver and organizer in her community. Her father and community leaders came to see her point of view. The organization became a force within Indian civil society, campaigning for Muslim women's rights and running education, literacy, legal service and livelihood programmes for young women in Mumbai and beyond.

2. PAN Card (signature)
3. Bank Details
4. Flight Invoice
5. Local Travel Bill

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Building on this experience, Khan founded the Bebaak Collective in 2016. “We had held a convention to put pressure on the State for social security and equal citizen rights and Muslim women’s rights to constitutional law. It took off from there.” The coalition is developing links and collaboration with counterparts in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as well as with the Minority Rights Group and Women Living Under Muslim Law in the United Kingdom.

A significant factor in the success of Awaaz-e-Niswan and now Bebaak has been a broad and participatory approach to organizing and advocacy, a reflection of Khan’s inclusive and open leadership style. “Women should represent their own interests rather than allow political and religious leaders to speak for them,” she says. “This work is not only for Muslim women but for all women and men working on women’s issues, and it can be used for understanding national as well as local problems, views and positions. In the end though, it is important that the coalition speaks with one voice.”

### **Education, mentoring and support of other women**

The challenges confronting Khan in her life and work have been no different from what millions of Muslim women in India experience – strictly defined and enforced gender roles, poverty, marginalization and isolation from the broader community. Still today, Khan encounters strong opposition (alongside growing broad support) to her efforts to shake up established gender roles through a combination of public advocacy and legal approaches.

Khan’s hard-earned education has been an important cornerstone in overcoming the challenges and continuing her leadership journey, opening doors that have led her far from her childhood starting place.

The role model and mentoring influence of former Awaaz-e-Niswan leader Shehnaaz Shaikh was

also crucial, helping Khan to develop the skills and confidence to eventually take on leadership of the organization and expand its outreach and influence. Other women, including feminist lawyers, legal advocates and community and NGO leaders from many parts of Indian society continue to provide important networks of support and personal sustenance. Reflecting back on her long experience campaigning for the rights and futures of Muslim women, Khan observes that “none of us is as strong as all of us. If I am able to stand up for what I believe in today, it is because of a collective forum standing firmly behind me.”

### **Abolition of all discriminatory laws**

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The future role of government policy and legislation is the abolition of all discriminatory personal laws.

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Building on the success of the triple *talaq* campaign, a core priority for Khan and the Bebaak Collective when looking at the future role of government policy and legislation is the abolition of all discriminatory personal laws. “Personal laws should focus on protection of personal rights rather than discriminate and should recognize marginalized groups within a community, in line with India’s constitutional values of equality, pluralism and secularism,” she argues.

Noting the enactment of India’s Domestic Violence Act, which took years of campaigning by women’s organizations, Khan adds that “while the Act talks about my matrimonial rights, personal laws cover all issues from birth to death. Both need to be discussed simultaneously.”

**Helen Hakena**  
Autonomous Region of Bougainville,  
Papua New Guinea

Co-founder and Executive Director of the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, established to help restore peace to the civil war-torn island after a 10-year civil war (1988–1998) between the government Defence Forces and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, which was fighting for independence.

At the centre of the conflict was the huge Australian-owned Panguna copper mine, which ravaged local communities and the environment, with minimal returns for local landowners and communities.

A leader among the women in Bougainville instrumental in bringing the conflict to an end. A peace deal signed in 2001 provided the framework for the election in 2005 of an Autonomous Bougainville Government. A referendum that will include the option of independence for Bougainville will take place in 2019.

Recipient of the Millennium Peace Prize Award for Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency on 8 March 2001.

Runner-up for the 2004 Pacific Human Rights Award.

One of the 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

Recipient of the Individual Award on Gender Excellence, in 2007.

Trained as a school teacher at Kabaleo Teachers' College, Bougainville and worked as a primary school teacher for 15 years.



**“What keeps me going now is how our women continue to struggle for peace and security in their homes as well as in our country.”**

**Crisis changes the course of life<sup>9</sup>**

Helen Hakena's life as a primary school teacher in Bougainville was thrown into turmoil with the outbreak of civil war in 1988. When a group of Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) guerrillas came to her home, threatening her and her children

9 Group discussion with colleagues in the Women's Development Agency: Bianca, Project Development Officer; Clay, male community advocate and counsellor; Bernadine, community counsellor, now local government Executive Officer in Bagana; Bridget, community volunteer, elected as local government representative at ward level; Audrey, community club supervisor in an outer atoll island; Graylyn, administrative officer.

and demanding to see her husband, Hakena was seven months pregnant and suffering from malaria. “I was petrified and soon after gave birth to my fourth son prematurely, on a table in the local bank building with no medical help.” Another woman died in child birth alongside her. “BRA and Papua New Guinea Defence Forces soldiers were raping women, sometimes taking them away by boat to nearby islands,” she says. Her son born that day is now 21 years old and says that the experience of his birth still influences who he is now as a young man concerned about social justice and gender equality.

The BRA burned Hakena’s home in Leta village to the ground, and the next day burned the entire village. Her husband’s businesses were also destroyed by fire, including a bakery. All institutions in Bougainville collapsed, including the hospital and schools. The province was plunged into crisis, with some 20,000 people dying and thousands displaced before the fighting came to an end.

These events changed the course of Hakena’s life and triggered the beginning of her peace work as she vowed to address the pain and suffering of women and girls that she had witnessed. In 1992, with a group of women from her former school, Hakena co-founded the Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency, with the slogan “Women Weaving Bougainville Together”. The aim was to mobilize young people – women and men – to promote peace.

The Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency began by providing humanitarian relief, clothes and medicines to affected families. During the blockade by the government Defence Forces, they organized mothers travelling to the mainland to return with medicine concealed in their baskets, hidden beneath soiled nappies, feminine hygiene products or underwear. Courses on family life, counselling services and workshops on alcohol abuse and violence against women followed, along with peace marches and campaigns. The latter were opposed by both the government army and the BRA. The women activists would communicate with each other by exchanging messages in the local market. When they were told to stop making public speeches, they dressed in black and marched in silence with their messages on banners. “We outsmarted the army most of the time,” says Hakena. “At that time, the women

of Bougainville were very united, whatever their clans, religious denomination or village. We wanted peace and economic development. Everything had collapsed. There was no income for people, no businesses, nothing to buy....”

Hakena and the Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency team began to go out to villages to provide urgently needed supplies, carry out awareness raising and promote peacebuilding campaigns. But the organization had no funds and the work was ad hoc. The beginning of international support from Australia and New Zealand allowed them to move around the villages more effectively, often using sports, such as volley ball, to bring people together and to build trust. The Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency’s volunteer base expanded, peacebuilding tools and skills were developed and applied, and lessons were learned about how best to work with village communities, dynamics and structures. Leadership training and mentoring among communities became a core part of the organization’s work, which continues to this day.

At the same time, the Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency was reaching out to involve more men. Male advocates and counsellors were recruited, trained and sent back to their own home villages to support people still traumatized by the conflict. When challenged by local men about the organization’s focus on women in the conflict, the male advocates would answer: “The leadership of these women is for everybody, not just women and girls.”

Hakena realized early in their campaign that involving men was imperative to bringing about peace. “We began mobilization programmes for ex-combatants, helping them rehabilitate and lay down arms by making them aware of the impact of small arms and violence against women and providing counselling services. Former guerrillas are now working with us and talking to communities about the impact of violence on women. Our masculinity programmes encourage men and boys to change their behaviour and attitudes.”

As international recognition and support grew, Hakena took the Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency’s messages to the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995. As well as campaigning for the adoption of UN Security

Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, Hakena represented the women of the world in presenting a petition to the UN Secretary-General, signed by 350,000 women leaders, calling on the UN Security Council to include women in peacekeeping missions.

### Early beginnings create basis for later leadership role

Born to a chiefly family in Gogohe village on Buka Island in Bougainville, Hakena's upbringing brought her more opportunities than other girls. Her clan owns land collectively, women and men, with decisions on its use made together for everyone's benefit. From early on, Hakena had opportunities to go to clan meetings and learn about local issues and how they were resolved. As a result, she had greater confidence than other girls her age to speak her mind and discuss issues and would exercise leadership among the girls in the clan. Hakena's grandparents and parents were powerful role models who were greatly respected for their service and leadership in the community. The experience of education at an all-girls Catholic school and teachers' college reinforced her clan upbringing. She was a leader throughout her time in both institutions.

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We need to be strategic...and build the profile of women leaders.

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The experiences of clan and education provided Hakena with a base to turn to during the Bougainville crisis. "Those early experiences taught me about collective leadership and moulded what I am today. Together, they gave me the strength to work for peace. What keeps me going now is how our women continue to struggle for peace and security in their homes as well as in our country and the appreciation women have for my work and the work of the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency. I also draw strength from my family and my clan, including my brothers, who are still clan chiefs, and my husband, who has been my partner

in all I do. We will continue this work, despite our human rights defenders being branded as witches."

### Turning leadership experience to emerging new issues

The Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency's twenty-fifth anniversary was marked by an annual general meeting in Buka Island on 22 August 2017. Several of those involved in the organization's work over many years were present – many of them now have important roles in their regions and communities as magistrates, government officials, elected representatives, community leaders and community advocates. "Men and women at the AGM said that the leadership and advocacy skills they gained from the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency over the years had helped to make them what they are today," says Hakena.

While addressing unresolved issues and divisions from the conflict is still a core part of the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency's training, facilitating, advocacy and community development work, the leadership and advocacy skills honed in response to human conflict are now being turned towards a new conflict – with rising sea levels as a result of climate change.

The encroachment of rising sea levels on some outer atolls in Bougainville, particularly the Carteret Islands, is already forcing the relocation of many people to the larger Buka Island or Bougainville mainland. Often, they end up living in squatter camps because they lack access to land and housing. "It is very hard to start again and to earn a livelihood in a different language after being used to a subsistence lifestyle," Hakena explains. "Often, the men leave first to find work. They leave their families behind and find new wives. This is creating a situation where rape and domestic violence are rife. We are working with the local police, the family support centre and legal aides to support the women affected, as well as assisting with small-scale livelihood projects. But we are concerned that this situation is now becoming normalized and won't get the concerted focus by government agencies and others that it needs."





With the support of the Asia-Pacific Women, Law and Development Forum, the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency has been using a feminist participatory action research methodology to engage affected women in consciousness raising, create safe spaces for women to share their stories, build collective strength and facilitate collective solutions. The Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency is working with the International Organization for Migration and affected women to map community assets, potential risks and ways forward. "Initially, many were blaming the gods for what is happening," says Hakena. "We have been explaining what the real causes are and working with women in the affected communities to look at the practical steps they can take, such as restoring protective mangrove areas and developing alternative livelihoods."

Also at the forefront of Hakena's agenda today is encouraging the population, particularly young people, to engage in local and national politics and the upcoming referendum that will determine Bougainville's future. In the recent elections, areas where the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency is active, had higher levels of candidate participation. Eight young women and men with links to the Women's Development Agency were elected at the local level.

"Women in Bougainville are very active at the grass-roots level, in their clans and villages and through the church, but this is not yet reflected in national politics yet. The higher up in the national hierarchy, the less support there is for women," says Hakena. "We need to be strategic. We can use our clan linkages and our networks of women to reach out and build the profile of women leaders. We need to be working together for the next national elections in five years' time, building on the three reserved seats that we have achieved in the Autonomous Bougainville Government House of Representatives as well as women elected at ward level. The door has been opened a little with the recent local election of one woman in a general constituency seat, for the first time."

A major constraint for women in political leadership is access to resources. Hakena points out that men are able to be more active in electoral politics because of their greater access to financing. Women find it difficult to get loans from the banks,

especially if they are from non-chiefly families. Small income-generation projects for women helps give them some greater independence and access to resources. "Women ensure that their family is fed and clothed and look after each other. Their role benefits the whole clan. Direct access to resources is very important, including to make sure that children can afford to go on the bus to get to health services and that women have the opportunity to participate in community activities. But progress is very slow." One important recent initiative by the female deputy speaker in the local parliament is the creation of a revolving fund to provide microfinance to Bougainville women.

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Small income-generation projects for women helps give them some greater independence and access to resources.

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### **Government role critical in opening up new opportunities for women**

While focusing on women's efforts to create opportunities and space for women to emerge as leaders wherever they are, Hakena also points to areas where government action could make a difference. First and foremost is the need for governments at the national and local levels to commit to a new model of development whereby "women are central to decision-making around any development matters."

A number of policy steps and commitments by government and international partners are crucial to back up this vision. Among these is the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325, which advocates the mainstreaming of women's perspectives into peace operations and a greater presence of women in decision-making roles at the national, regional and international levels. As a further stepping stone, Hakena advocates for the introduction at the national level

of 22 reserved parliamentary seats for women, a long-standing request of women's organizations. Also critically needed in Bougainville is greater investment in education for girls and ensuring that the curriculum helps girls and boys to understand the importance of gender equality, human rights and participating in public activities, such as elections and referendums. The Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency is promoting and supporting such changes in the content of education.

Improving infrastructure, such as roads and public transport, to ensure better and safer access to health care, education and markets will also make a big difference, as will making increased resources available from national and local government budgets for the economic empowerment of women, including through access to finance and skills training.

Hakena has a clear message for international organizations working in Bougainville. While highlighting the important support provided over many years by international partners, she notes a growing trend for international NGOs to act as "middlemen", directly managing international funds rather than resourcing local organizations to do the work. "They now more often set up their own structures and programmes and overlook the work already under way by local NGOs, including in areas like leadership training. They can afford to pay high salaries by local standards and attract staff away from local organizations. We belong here, it is our country – and we look to our international partners to work alongside us, not over us and to help strengthen local capacity and leadership development initiatives."

## Imrana Jalal

Fiji

Selected as one of the Pacific's 70 inspiring women by the Pacific Community.

Chair (from December 2018) of the Inspection Panel of the World Bank and a Vice-President at the World Bank in Washington, D.C.

Former principal gender specialist at the Asian Development Bank in Manila.

Commissioner on the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists since 2006.

Co-founder and current Executive Board member of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement.

Former Commissioner on the Fiji Human Rights Commission, which she co-established.

Fiji Law Reform Commissioner and architect of Fiji's Family Law Act.

Co-founder and former human rights adviser to the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team.

Associated with the international networks Women Living Under Muslim Law (Pakistan) and the Asia Pacific Forum for Women, Law and Development (Thailand).

Member of UN Women's Global Expert Advisory Group, guiding the production of the 2018 *Progress of the World's Women* flagship report.

Holds a Bachelor of Laws and a Master of Laws from the University of Auckland in New Zealand and a Master of Arts in Gender Studies from the University of Sydney, Australia.



**“It is vital to respect cultural forms and protocols while influencing the substance...”**

### **Transforming women's lives and prospects through law and legal rights**

In 1986, Imrana Jalal was the only lawyer in a group of women who founded the highly influential Fiji Women's Rights Movement. As well as being at the forefront of campaigning for the rights of women and girls in Fiji for more than 30 years, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement has become an important player within the South Pacific, collaborating with and supporting similar initiatives in other countries.

Jalal is also a co-founder in 1994 of the award-winning human rights initiative, the Pacific

Regional Rights Resource Team. With Jalal as human rights adviser providing training, policy and technical advice, the Resource Team became a successful regional agency working in 12 Pacific island countries and building a 300-strong network of community paralegals and human rights defenders. The Resource Team won the 1998 UNICEF Maurice Pate Award from a field of 111 international candidates. It is cited as an Asia-Pacific best practice in rights-based approaches by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Jalal's book, *Law for Pacific Women: A Legal Rights Handbook*, has been influential across the region as a reference for the advancement of women's legal rights. It was designed to make laws accessible to policymakers, legislators and activists as well as provide a strong philosophical and research base for the Fiji Women's Rights Movement and similar networks and organizations. Research covered the human and legal rights of women in nine Pacific countries. It is now a textbook for the University of the South Pacific Law School.

Over 12 years, Jalal drafted and helped negotiate the passage of the groundbreaking Fiji Family Law Act. The new legislation gave women unprecedented equality in family law, and it has been emulated in other Pacific countries. Previously, the family law in Fiji had been based on legislation imported from the United Kingdom between 1892 and 1973. Jalal describes laws at that time as discriminating against women, legitimizing violence, patriarchal and based on rigid concepts of women's roles within the family, including women's lack of autonomy. "For me personally," she says, "the new law was a culmination of a journey. Not all stakeholders were happy with all parts of the law. For example, some feminists believe that I sold out by not ensuring that de facto partners be given the same rights as married partners, a position I had initially insisted on. I was forced to compromise on this, knowing that it was a battle I would not win with the conservative legislature at the time. I was prepared to fight this battle another day." Inclusion of de facto partners under the law has since been approved by military decree, culminating the full original intent of Jalal's work.

Looking to the future, many young women and girls continue to be mentored as tomorrow's leaders by the Emerging Leadership Forum, which Jalal helped establish. The Emerging Leadership Forum began with young women who were 18–21 years of age. It is now open to girls aged 14–18. Participants, often recommended by community leaders and school principals, meet once a month over a weekend to network; share experiences; learn about gender, governance and human rights; and discuss issues ranging from sexuality to local political developments.

### **The beginnings of feminist and human rights understandings<sup>10</sup>**

As with most Pacific families, her childhood was dominated by religion. "In my case, the religious divisions in the family had a profound effect on my life. I grew up in a household where I had a Muslim father and a Catholic mother, and both were very devout about their religion. However, I went to a Catholic convent school as my father greatly respected the education offered by British nuns."

The religious dimensions of Jalal's upbringing took another turn after her father returned to Pakistan to bring his *mawlana* (priest) father back to Fiji. He became "not only more devout but more strict with us, constantly curbing our behaviour and trying to raise us more traditionally. It would have been better if I were a boy because my father still thinks I have the personality of a man. I am a feminist, so I must have the personality of a man."

Jalal's father took seriously his responsibility to ensure that his daughters were educated and could earn their own living. "I acknowledge the sacrifices made by my parents, who were not wealthy, to give us the opportunities that they had never enjoyed," she says. "I remember how my father sold goats on the side to pay for my education at Auckland University in New Zealand. He would send me money from time to time and say, 'Just sold a goat today – here's some money.' However, I think once you [give us] an education,

10 As well as discussion with Imrana Jalal in August 2017, coverage of her leadership journey draws extensively on an article titled "Imrana Jalal: Human Rights Activist" by Rae Nicholl, unpublished, University of the South Pacific, 2008.



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to try to keep us in a straitjacket according to the vision of a nice South Asian girl is impossible.”

Feminism was inevitable, insists Jalal, “I think that when I was 5 years old, I had already become a feminist. If you grew up a girl in an Indo-Fijian family in Fiji in the 1960s, then you have an instinctive understanding of what gender discrimination means.”

Jalal’s education at Auckland Law School in New Zealand let her explore the world of legal rights and find the big sky of possibility. “The women who taught me there provided amazing role models to a young, naïve and highly impressionable Pacific islander. They ensured that I felt that there was really nothing that I could not do.” Scholarships from the Australian and Queensland Associations of Women Graduates later allowed her to graduate with a Master of Arts in Gender Studies from Sydney University in 1992. Jalal’s book, published and launched by the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement in 1998, was a major product of this period.

After finishing law studies in New Zealand, her interest in human rights led her to accept a position with Fiji’s Office of the Attorney-General as crown counsel and then some years later to run the legal aid office. In representing poor and disadvantaged women, Jalal became aware of the unequal treatment they experienced. “I began defending the poorest of women. They endured triple forms of discrimination. That was the steepest learning curve for me and gave me the philosophical underpinning for all I have done since.”

Jalal’s leadership became a central factor in the creation of new organizational forms, legal frameworks and approaches to addressing patriarchy and gender-based discrimination in Fiji and beyond. Friendships forged, expanded networks, opportunities to continue learning, shared vision and results achieved “further energized and sustained me in my work and life,” she says.

### **Pushing the boundaries comes at a cost**

In addition to the challenges of negotiating her space in a family situation where strict interpretations of

gender roles held sway, Jalal had to contend with opposition and even intimidation as her influence grew. In 1991, for example, the Fiji Public Service Commission declined to support paid study leave to enable her to take up a Fulbright Scholarship in the United States to study gender and the law at Stanford University because women’s issues “are not a priority for this government”.

The Fiji Family Law Act drew strong ire in some quarters. Jalal was accused by the Fijian Methodist Church of being an “evil force in society” and “trying to destroy the institution of marriage”. Her defence of human rights during successive military coups in Fiji also attracted threats of physical violence. In 2006, she was warned in a telephone call later traced to the vicinity of a military camp that she would have her “mouth shut forever” if she spoke out about events then embroiling the country, with the threat of a military coup in the wings. Jalal lived in fear for days and slept in different houses and was prevented from leaving the country; her employer had to negotiate for her to come and go for work.

### **Looking ahead: Promoting civil society space and legislative change both necessary**

The experience of the Fiji Family Law Act shows the impact that effective rights-based legislation can have in transforming the possibilities for achieving justice and ensuring that rights are upheld. But at the same time, Jalal points out, the law in itself is not enough. Just as important are NGOs and human rights defenders, like the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, that can “influence the shape of the law and hold governments and others accountable for its implementation.”

Jalal is concerned about growing pressures in the region on civil society space as the result of factors ranging from religious extremism to governments wanting to control independent community voices. An important priority for her is the protection of this space, including through legislation, to ensure that the voices and organizations of women and the wider community can flourish and be heard in policy decision-making at all levels of society. “Many women in the Pacific gain their skills and

confidence in leadership from their experience in voluntary organizations of all kinds,” she says.

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Many women in the Pacific gain their skills and confidence in leadership from their experience in voluntary organizations.

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One area that stands out to her for legislative attention in the Pacific is ensuring equal rights for women to the ownership of land and other assets, which are necessary for pursuing independent livelihoods, having status in the community and accessing resources to participate in electoral processes. “If you look across the region, there tends to be more women in national leadership roles in countries where women have higher levels of land ownership or control, such as in Samoa. But this still tends to be restricted to women from chiefly families. There is a need to open up opportunities for all women,” she argues.

The process of working for such changes and to promote more women into leadership roles is also fundamentally important. In a message particularly directed to international agencies and civil society organizations, Jalal highlights the importance of the nexus between culture, gender and leadership. Emphasizing the necessity of working within the cultural space available in any particular society to promote change, she observes that “in the Pacific context, it is vital to respect cultural forms and protocols while influencing the substance in order to retain respect and avoid being isolated in the community.”

Valuing strategy and patience is another lesson for Jalal. Pointing to the 20 years it took to get quantitative gender requirements embedded into the mainstream systems of the Asia Development Bank, where she formerly worked, she reflects that “now they provide important entry points and leverage to create space for women’s voices and interests to be heard and to be reflected in programmes”. For example, the Asian Development Bank requires that governance bodies for projects involving land, water, education and health have minimum quotas for representation by women, often up to 30 per cent.

## Jeannie E. Javelosa Philippines

Co-founder of the pioneering and multi-awarded Philippines retail store and social enterprise ECHOstore<sup>11</sup> Sustainable Lifestyle and ECHOsi Foundation.

Prime motivator behind the GREAT Women brand, an advocacy-driven marketing platform that supports women's economic empowerment through a regional supply chain within the ASEAN region.

Founding President, now Chair of the Business and Professional Women Network Makati; member of the Women's Business Council of the Philippines; and gender representative in the Micro-Small-Medium Enterprise Development Council of the Philippines Department of Trade and Industry.

Co-founder and Board member of the 20-year award-winning agency, EON Group, recognized by the 2014 Sabre Awards Asia Pacific as the South-East Asia Consultancy of the Year, the 2017 Southeast Asia PR Agency of the Year from Campaign and the 2017 Innovation Award for Culture and Organization from Enterprise Asia.

Nominated as EY Women Entrepreneur of the Year (final awards to be announced by October 2019) by Ernst & Young Global Consulting.

Recipient of GoNegosyo Outstanding Women Entrepreneur, in 2018 (Enabler category), Manila.

2018 Outstanding ASEAN Women Entrepreneur, given by the ASEAN Women Entrepreneur Network in Bangkok.

Nominated for the 2018 50 Most Influential Women in Asia Award, produced by SingEx and presented by Standard Chartered Bank, together with Ernst & Young and Singapore National University as knowledge partners.

Asia-Pacific recipient of the Cartier Women's Initiative Award, in 2012, in Paris.

Award-winning artist and printmaker, with 20 solo exhibitions to her name.

Recipient of the Manila Critics Award for coffee table books; the most recent book is entitled *The Feminine Rising: The Awakening of GREAT Women*, published by the EON Foundation. *Women Beyond Borders: The Beginning of GREAT Women in ASEAN* was published by USAYS in 2017.

Holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Pennsylvania, USA.

<sup>11</sup> ECHO means Environment, Community, Hope, Organization.



“Doing what we are truly meant to do in our lives.”

### The initial spark<sup>12</sup>

“Never in my wildest dreams did I, an artist, imagine myself running a retail business, being an advocate for women or engineering the building of an advocacy marketing platform to support women enterprises,” says Jeannie Javelosa. In hindsight, the co-founder of the pioneering Philippines retail store and social enterprise ECHOstore and the ECHOsi Foundation also says, “The journey was really about many women who bought into the vision. Each was so committed in their own respective roles, each trying to bring the partnerships together and see how it could move

<sup>12</sup> This profile draws extensively on Jeannie E. Javelosa, *Women Beyond Borders: The Beginning of GREAT Women in ASEAN* (Manila, USAYS, 2017). Also interviewed: Imelda Canuel, GREAT Women Programs Officer, who, with Jeannie Javelosa, supported the community development side of GREAT Women in the Philippines.



forward. It has been life changing and inspiring to witness how shared commitment and drive can transform a vision and concept into action and reality.”

Within five years of the founding of ECHOstore (2008) and the associated ECHOsi Foundation (2009),<sup>13</sup> that vision, action and reality were already making a difference in the lives and prospects of some 500 women microentrepreneurs across the Philippines, with an additional 900 beneficiaries through cascade workshops, impacting 28,500 women, their own supply chains and household members. In 2015, ECHOstore was included in the list of the 50 top women-led companies in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. In 2017, ECHOstore was one of the top women-led enterprises in the ASEAN region.

Driving these developments was the original “ECHOtrio” – Javelosa and two friends, Chit Juan and Reena Francisco. Looking for new opportunities and directions in life, they realized nobody was helping poor producers sell their products or talking about the sustainable green lifestyles in the Philippines. “Many marginalized groups and communities needed more livelihood. That meant, we needed to sell, sell and sell their products. While so many NGO and microfinance groups were helping them, no one was really selling their products in a focused manner. So, bringing our unique expertise together, we initiated ECHOstore, setting a process in motion that is now engaging with partners across ASEAN.”

### **Forging partnerships for green, gender and good**

A monumental milestone in the growing reach and impact of the ECHOtrio’s vision was the forging of a partnership with the Philippines GREAT Women Project<sup>14</sup> in 2012. This project, now into its second phase with the ECHOsi Foundation as private sector lead partner for market access, began in 2006 as a Canadian Government partnership with the Philippine Commission on Women to promote a gender-responsive enabling environment for women’s economic empowerment.

The first phase of the GREAT Women Project assisted 7,331 women microentrepreneurs in 204 groups across 45 local government units, giving them increased access to public and private sector programmes and services, thus expanding their market opportunities. From the partnership came the launching of the GREAT Women brand in March 2013, which galvanized the marketing efforts of women microentrepreneurs, not just within the Philippines but increasingly throughout the ASEAN region – to date in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia and Myanmar. In 2014, ownership of the Great Women Brand was formally transferred by the Philippine Commission on Women and the Canadian Government to Javelosa and her two partners.

Together, the ECHOstore network, the ECHOsi Foundation<sup>15</sup> and the GREAT Women Brand are now the cornerstones of a rapidly expanding platform to transform the lives and prospects of women microentrepreneurs. The contribution of each can be described as the “threeGs,” says Javelosa. “Our inclusive business brands of ECHOstores highlight the green, GREAT Women highlights the gender focus, while the ECHOsi Foundation highlights the good [that are] embedded in all we do.”

This is a multisectoral, inclusive business platform based in the Philippines, with a foothold into the ASEAN region. It has been presented as a best-case example of a gender platform in France, Jordan, the Republic of Korea and Peru. It brings together international agencies, national government agencies, NGOs and women’s enterprises to support women’s economic empowerment through a regional supply chain and a technology-driven global online portal. Under the 3G (green-gender-good) philosophy of the two social enterprises and the non-profit foundation, they impact the development and market access of products from small artisan communities and support the acceleration of other social and women’s enterprises.

Within these rapidly moving developments, the focus of Javelosa and her collective leadership team remains on the grass-roots women they

13 ECHOsi: Empowering Communities with Hope and Opportunities Through Sustainable Initiatives.

14 The Gender Responsive Economic Actions for the Transformation of Women (GREAT Women) Project.

15 The ECHOsi Foundation now focuses on livelihood sustainability for indigenous communities in alignment with the Philippines National Commission on Culture and the Arts.



began partnering with. “We are building leadership and broadening the space for others to grow, including in their own communities and families. Our approach is to listen, to ask questions, to facilitate connections, to mentor and to create space. It is a great joy to us to see grass-roots indigenous women growing in confidence, courage and creativity and becoming leaders in their own right – all part of a network of sisterhood aided by big-sister-run enterprises.”

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Part of the approach [is to] provide...strategy and framework to send women microentrepreneurs and small businesses into the global supply chain through the building of skills and capabilities, fostering international business linkages, encouraging mutual support among women and facilitating access across national borders to international markets.

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There are many groups and foundations supporting community initiatives and empowerment in the Philippines, so what makes the EHCotrio initiative different? “We are not unique,” acknowledges Javelosa. “But ECHOsi Foundation’s special contribution has been to bridge what I call, the ‘loop of sustainability’. We do this, first of all, by strategically developing products for different markets and, second, by helping open these markets for them. Livelihood groups make products not knowing what the market wants. So, it’s really also about teaching the community groups about the different markets, bringing in

innovative designers and product developers who are selling in these markets, providing mentorship, walking alongside the grass-roots producers and creating actual links to bring their products to these markets.” The GREAT Women part of the approach provides both a strategy and framework to send women microentrepreneurs and small businesses into the global supply chain through the building of skills and capabilities, fostering international business linkages, encouraging mutual support among women and facilitating access across national borders to international markets.

### **A concept waiting to be born**

When asked what enabled this role as GREAT Women visionary and leader, with all its relentless demands and pressures, Javelosa looks back to all the skills, insights and confidence gained through her previous professional experiences. These included the opportunity to study and travel abroad, to learn about self-care and teach yoga and to develop organizational, strategic planning and project management skills as a cultural manager and communicator. “The ECHOtrio came upon a concept that was just waiting to be born. It seemed to come out of nowhere. In hindsight now, that was the moment when the unexpected, unscripted occurs – where all of what we have done in our professional lives, our intentions and our desire to do good, our skills and talents, came to a meeting point to make us begin doing what we are truly meant to do in our lives.”

There have been many challenges on the way, she says, not the least those created by “our own internal glass ceilings and overcoming our own fears.” From the start, the ECHOtrio “believed in our vision and were driven by our intentions to do good, founded on solid business principles. But because we didn’t start with a traditional straight-line business plan, persuading others in the business and financial community to come along with us, especially male counterparts, was not always easy. But we have shown what can be achieved through our organic feminine approach, and support has continued to grow.”

One particular practical challenge has been how to bridge the financing gap between the initial costs of production and development for grass-roots microentrepreneurs, on the one hand, and the

first income that starts to come in from sales, on the other. With their vision and optimism, Javelosa leveraged support from the Philippines Peace and Equity Foundation to create a low-interest finance arrangement, in effect a grant to the GREAT Women partners. “We have learned that with every problem comes a solution, and nobody has a monopoly on good ideas,” she beams.

Keeping the energy flowing through the inevitable difficult times is the satisfaction of seeing women from indigenous communities across the Philippines growing in confidence, improving their livelihoods or their families’ and communities’ conditions and becoming leaders in their own right. Then there is the excitement and motivation of being part of a development that is “gathering its own momentum and reaching beyond its small beginnings far into ASEAN – the continuous learning and knowing that we are making a difference and changing the game for women entrepreneurs.”

The Philippines is known as a country of strong women, says Javelosa. “It is to the credit of the Filipino man who supports us or stays out of our way. We are also a highly entrepreneurial country, with women leading 51 per cent of microenterprises, which account for 99 per cent of all businesses.”

## **Partnerships and innovation integral to future impact**

Looking back and looking ahead, a guiding lesson and driver for Javelosa is the multiplier and levelling-up power of partnerships around a shared vision. Core to the realization of the initial ECHOtrio’s expanding vision has been the partnerships at the government level with the Philippine Commission on Women, the Department of Trade and Industry and other departments and agencies (nationally and locally); with business, designer and NGO colleagues; with grass-roots women and communities; and with the Canadian Government, the United States Agency for International Development, the UPS Foundation and a French fashion brand, among others.

A major influence within the growing partnership ecosystem has been the Philippine Commission on Women, which has driven gender and women’s entrepreneurship into government policy, budgets and services at all levels, making resources available that GREAT Women continues to both leverage and influence.

It is this spirit of shared vision, openness to strategic opportunities, innovation, partnership and always looking for transformative impact that Javelosa highlights as essential for ensuring that governments, international agencies and other players can really make a difference for grass-roots women entrepreneurs and emerging leaders.

*Logeswary Ponniah*  
Sri Lanka

Programme Coordinator of the Human Development Organization, an NGO that works with poor and marginalized communities in the plantations and rural areas of Sri Lanka, with programmes on the rights, livelihoods and participation in society of Dalit communities, including through building capabilities for self-reliance and self-management.

Secretary General of Women Solidarity Front.

Steering committee member of the Asian Rural Women's Coalition.

Member the national platform of Mother and Daughter Sri Lanka.

Member of the Asia Dalit Rights Forum.

Director and Board member of the Asia Team of the International Alliance Against All Forms of Racial Discrimination.



**“There is nothing that women can’t do, especially when they support each other.”**

**The voice of women plantation workers is rarely heard**

A member of one of Sri Lanka’s most marginalized groups – the women of Tamil origin working in the country’s tea plantations, Logeswary Ponniah has devoted her life to campaigning for their rights, dignity and livelihoods, helping to put their situation on the national and international agenda.

The up-country plantation Tamil are a minority community (about 6 per cent of the population) in Sri Lanka. Originally brought from southern India in the 1820s under British colonial rule as labourers to work on the tea plantations, they continue to be subjected to various forms of discrimination while denied political, socioeconomic and cultural rights.

“We have only had citizen rights since 2003 on paper,” says Ponniah. “Still, we are outside the mainstream of society and national institutions and systems, with limited access to education, health care and decent housing. Thousands of plantation people are even still denied access to social protection coverage through the Employer Provident Fund.”

As well as the discrimination and marginalization they endure as tea pluckers and, in many cases, as Dalits, women in the plantations experience additional burdens due to their gender. Despite winning the right to equal wages in 1984, they are expected to work almost twice as many hours per day as male labourers – before their “second shift” of work begins at home. “The voice of women plantation workers is rarely heard in the decisions that affect their lives,” says Ponniah.

### **Important progress as a result of years of effort**

Despite the challenges and slow pace of change, Ponniah has seen important progress over 25 years of campaigning and community organizing. “Many more women from the plantations are speaking out and becoming involved in leadership roles and community activities,” she says. The influence of women leaders who can be role models is important to encourage others to become active, thus creating momentum for change.

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The influence of women leaders who can be role models is important to encourage others to become active, thus creating momentum for change.

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Building on these developments, Ponniah is part of a growing call for more women in the national parliament, including through the introduction of a gender quota. A 25 per cent gender quota was

achieved at the local council level after years of campaigning by women’s groups, although currently only one woman has been elected from the plantations. Of 13 women now in the national parliament, only two are from minority constituencies. Some of the women in parliament are only there as a proxy for a man, for example, due to the death of a brother who was serving, notes Ponniah.

As a result, encouraging, supporting and training women to participate in elections at all levels has become a priority in her work. More than 1,000 Muslim Women have participated in training activities to participate in the upcoming local elections. Supporting more women into leadership roles in trade unions is another focus of Ponniah and her team. “Even where the membership is mainly women, trade union leadership is male dominated,” says Ponniah.

Another important achievement in recent years has been the development of a national platform that brings a range of different organizations and initiatives together in support of the rights of plantation communities, promoting their cause in a coordinated way to the attention of national policy-makers, including government ministers and officials. “This platform is based on shared issues and a commitment to sustainable peace and labour rights,” says Ponniah. “We realized that we need to work with the authorities for change and to broaden influence by working with other major NGOs.”

Before 2015, the space for civil society activity in Sri Lanka was limited. A change of government opened greater opportunities for civil society organizations to organize and influence the national policy discourse. A major step forward came with the adoption in 2016 of a National Plan of Action for the Social Development of the Plantation Community (2016–2020) and the appointment of a new minister from the plantations. Building practical cooperation with government ministries and agencies to implement the plan of action and bring about improvements in access to basic health services and education has become an important focus for Ponniah and the Human Development Organization.

Many years of effort have also succeeded in bringing the situation of the plantation workers to



global attention, particularly through the United Nations Third Committee in New York, which addresses social, humanitarian affairs and human rights issues. In 2016, Ponniah presented the situation of the plantation workers and the caste system in Sri Lanka to the Committee. She was also part of presenting a case on the plantation workers' conditions during the World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001.

### **Connecting and empowering at all levels**

Core to Ponniah's vision and leadership approach is a focus on connecting people at all levels: local to local and local to national and international. At the core of these efforts is the development of interaction between plantation women, female migrant workers (many Sri Lankan women are hired as domestic workers in the Middle East) and women working in the country's free trade zones. This has included opening opportunities for plantation women to directly meet the decision-makers that affect their lives, both by taking them to Sri Lanka's capital of Colombo and facilitating visits by political leaders to meet grass-roots women in the plantations and see the issues for themselves. Similarly, the Human Development Organization supported an opportunity for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Rita Izsák-Ndiaye, to visit the plantations in 2016 and connect directly with the women.

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Opportunities for women of different communities and faiths to visit each other's temples were facilitated to build trust, respect and links between communities and reinforce the foundations for sustainable peace.

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In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Ponniah helped to build links between plantation women and Tamil women in the devastated eastern region of Sri Lanka. These links remain as a basis for mutual support and sharing problems, experience, lessons and strategies. Opportunities for women of different communities and faiths to visit each other's temples were facilitated to build trust, respect and links between communities and reinforce the foundations for sustainable peace.

These efforts extend across national boundaries through the development of networks for mutual support with dispossessed people in other countries, including in community health.

Empowering plantation women by expanding their knowledge and skills is another core thrust of Ponniah's leadership approach, such as how to analyse the national budget and advocate for resources. Linked to these developments is the promotion of a shared knowledge and analytical base through research on women's economic empowerment, land ownership rights and job skills.

Reflecting on the advice she would give emerging women leaders, Ponniah highlights the importance of taking every opportunity to learn and study well and to build self-confidence by finding the information needed to speak on any issue. "Don't be afraid to speak up, talk louder, otherwise nobody will hear you. There is nothing that women can't do, especially when they support each other. Leadership is a lifelong commitment to the people you are working with – it's not time-bound by office hours."

The importance of reaching out to involve men is also vital, emphasizes Ponniah, including through social media and developing male allies and advocates at all levels in government and civil society.

### **International support, family and working together in the leadership journey**

Ponniah's leadership journey has been the opportunity to participate in training in Geneva on advocacy and campaigning, including how to engage effectively in international meetings. "Our experience shows that it is very important



to be heard and effective in international fora, to strengthen international partnerships and to have access to the resources that we need to keep our struggle moving forward,” she says. Ponniah highlights the need to continue improving her English language skills as a personal development priority. Access to community-based health training at the Asia Health Institute in Japan also enhanced her leadership impact with knowledge, skills and confidence.

The support of her parents and wider family contributed to Ponniah’s development as a leader and her ability to overcome the immense challenges in her young life. Likewise, the mutual support, shared learning and inspiration found in women’s groups and networks at the local, national and international levels have been a critical leadership enabler.

**Unless women are in leadership at all levels, we will not see real change**

Through her campaigning and community development work with the Human Development Organization, Ponniah concentrates on developing a sustainable alternative future for plantation workers through agro-ecological farming – an approach to food production based on ecologically

low-impact agricultural practices that work with the natural surroundings, not against them.

Agro-ecological farming is an increasing trend in many countries worldwide, including in Asia. Essential to the realization of this vision is access to uncultivated lands and rights to land ownership for men and women. “This a big challenge,” says Ponniah. “In the north of Sri Lanka, women can own land, but we have a long way to go to ensure that all women have rights to land ownership. The leadership of women in the community and at all levels is vital to keep pushing these boundaries.”

Continuing to campaign for more women in leadership, including through a gender quota in the national parliament, is another priority, building on progress at the local level. “Unless women’s own voices are heard and women are in leadership at all levels, we will not see real change,” says Ponniah. “At the national level, the economic figures for Sri Lanka may be improving. But at the grass-roots level, especially for grass-roots women, life is not changing much yet.”

The resources, leverage and profile that comes from international partnerships and policy processes recognition “will also continue to be very important to support our work to achieve gender justice and sustainable peace,” says Ponniah.

## Malika Virdi India

Women's rights campaigner for more than 35 years on dowry extortion, violence against women and girls, forced sterilization of women, sexual and reproductive health and rights, access to non-formal education, access to sustainable livelihoods, the impacts of hydroelectric dam development on women's interests and opportunities to participate in decision-making and leadership at all levels.

Elected head of her village forest council (*van panchayat*) for seven years (2003–2010) and re-elected in January 2018 for another five-year term.

One of 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

Holds a Master of Arts in Social Sciences and Master of Philosophy from Delhi University.



“A leader is like a wave that rises when its time comes and subsides to make way for the next.”

### From Delhi squatter settlements to the mountains of northern India<sup>16</sup>

“Breaking the silence,” Malika Virdi believes, “is the starting point of any change.” As a women's rights campaigner, farmer, community entrepreneur,

<sup>16</sup> This interview summary draws from and incorporates input from previous interviews posted on the following websites: *Homestays that make a difference: In conversation with Malika Virdi*. Available at <https://blog.rightstay.com/2016/07/04/homestays-that-make-a-differencemalika-virdi-a-farmer-entrepreneur-and-sarpanch/>; *My conversations with Malika Virdi*. Rediff.com. Available at <http://news.rediff.com/slide-show/2010/aug/09/slide-show-1-extraordinary-indian-the-mountaineer-changing-lives.htm>; and *Malika Virdi (India)*. Available at [http://wikipeacewomen.org/wpworg/en/?page\\_id=](http://wikipeacewomen.org/wpworg/en/?page_id=)

community development practitioner, mountaineer and *sarpanch* (elected village head), among many other roles, Virdi has broken many silences in her fight for women's rights. She now carries on her lifelong commitments to women's rights and sustainable development at community and regional levels from a village called Sarmoli, close to the last small town before the Nepal-Tibet border in Uttarakhand State, India.

After completing her university studies in Delhi, Virdi was drawn into India's growing women's movement. It was the early 1980s and news of brides being burned for dowry extortion had become commonplace in India. "We took to the streets, literally, with political theatre on the issues of dowry and custodial rape, performing in residential colonies and outside government offices during lunch breaks. While we performed, we would sometimes see women in the audience begin to cry, and we'd know that we had touched a raw nerve and had connected with their particular struggle. It became increasingly clear, though, that it was not enough to engage with crises on individual struggles alone. The norms that validate prevailing practices [and] the larger systemic reality of patriarchy had to be challenged as well."

Life changed for Virdi after the 1984 Sikh massacres following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, when she realized the full impact of what it meant to be part of the minority Sikh community. This realization of multiple identities – of being a woman, a member of a minority community and of later being a rural subsistence farmer – propelled her towards what she would do for the rest of her life. Virdi worked in the relief camps and recorded the testimonies of women victims of the riots. Engagement with related issues followed because "one is often nested in the other", she observes. She worked and developed her leadership skills in health, women's sexuality and non-formal education. While working with rural migrants in the squatter settlements and resettlement colonies of Delhi, Virdi gained "an awareness of the deep divides of class and caste and of the economic aspects of women's lives, not just as housewives but also at the bottom rung of the workforce."

"But I found Delhi, and our small efforts in this huge city, entirely overwhelming," she adds. "There was also a yearning for a deeper and

more immediate connectedness with people embedded in, not uprooted from, their landscapes." In 1987, Virdi moved to Rajasthan to work with a state-run women's development programme on issues of women's health and sexuality. "This work connected us to rural women across several districts, and it was such work in villages that made me feel more connected."

In the late 1980s, a prolonged drought in Rajasthan led to the establishment by the Government of a controversial food-for-work programme. Women were given employment in public works on the condition that they had themselves sterilized. "While our mandate was to make available information on sexuality and reproduction, we stood with the women against coercive sterilization. Predictably, we were kicked out of the programme along with all those who had protested."

A major collective achievement of this period was the development of a pictorial storybook on women's sexuality, reproductive biology and gender politics. "We called it the *lal kitab*, or the red book. Our reward was to see this book go on to be adapted and translated into many languages and used extensively in India and elsewhere." The formation of an autonomous women's collective, Mahila Samooh, followed in Ajmer, Rajasthan to carry out crisis interventions and provide a women's support network.

### Reconnecting the personal and political

"After five years though, my life seemed to be ready to take the next step," recalls Virdi. "However deeply engaged I was in the various issues while in Rajasthan, it was, at one level, an engagement in abstraction, in that, political consequences were not quite the same for me as for the local people. I was always in a sense an 'outsider', speaking with and working with people to change their situation. I wanted really to engage as a citizen on issues that affected my life as well and that was more organically connected to a particular landscape and its future. My 'political' aspects needed to become more 'personal' again, not just at an individual scale but at a larger, collective, community scale. With stakes that were also my own."



In 1992, Virdi moved to live on a 5-acre farm in Sarmoli village in India's far north, in the Himalaya mountains. "Among other things, I farm the land for food and, like other farmers in mountain areas, am dependent on forests for cycling nutrients through livestock." In 2003, Virdi was elected head of the village forest council (*van panchayat*), a position she held for seven years, and has been actively involved with issues that relate with forests, people's livelihoods and conservation.

She was re-elected in 2018 for another five-year term. With a local women's collective called Maati (earth), founded in 1996 by rural mountain women, Virdi supports efforts to strengthen women's livelihoods through agriculture, wool handicrafts and nature-tourism-related work, including the establishment of homestay businesses. Addressing violence against women remains as much a focus for Maati as it was in Virdi's previous urban-based work.

"Our group synergizes with a larger state-wide women's forum, called the Uttarakhand Mahila Manch, on state-level policy issues that affect women's lives," explains Virdi. "Uttarakhand is a relatively new state, and it is presently on overdrive on the 'project of development'. There are plans under way for hundreds of hydropower projects to export electricity from the state. Should this be allowed to happen, it will effectively snuff out our rivers and all life in them, apart from causing serious displacement of rural people from their homes, their land and their forests. The question we are raising here is 'whose development at whose cost?'"

This challenge to the dominant development paradigm of the day was the result of a concerted drive for "gender citizenship" among the inhabitants of the region and to forge a "public identity" as women. By reclaiming democratic spaces through active participation in campaigns and public mobilization, women no longer were the "crowd" or the silent numbers in any demonstration, but they often led from the front. In 2010, a large hydropower construction company was forced to withdraw its 261 MW power project from the valley.

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By reclaiming democratic spaces through active participation in campaigns and public mobilization, women no longer were the "crowd" or the silent numbers in any demonstration, but they often led from the front.

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### **Identity a major driver in the leadership journey**

Many factors have been important to Virdi's leadership journey, but none more so than the question of identity. Her grandparents were farmers in Punjab State, so her cultural roots were there. "But my family lived in Delhi, so I was twice removed from the land. The first assertion of my identity came in 1984 when I realized that I belong to the Sikh community, a minority community. It was quite different from having a free-floating identity as an urban woman or just a Punjabi woman. In 1984, after Indira Gandhi's assassination, when the carnage against the Sikh population took place, it became very clear to me. I came face to face with my roots. I clearly realized that I belonged to a minority community. I am a Sikh and it has a meaning. It is not just a surname that I carry in life."

Also critical has been the support and inspiration of the local people where she now lives, her grandmother and the wider network of women working for change. "This small rural mountain community that has become home for me has lived in a geographically challenging environment with a small ecological footprint. It is a lifestyle that takes what it needs from nature, yet gives back as much through conservation. The women are strong and traditionally work in collaboration, creating supporting spaces for each other. I was fortunate also to have a strong grandmother, a challenging and determined woman who, beyond a point, would not bend. And more than anything,

there is the affirmation and support of the women's movement in Delhi and other places I have been. This has helped me relate my personal struggles with a larger feminist consciousness and to understand how the personal is political."

Another source of personal sustenance has been the lifestyle of the rural mountain communities where Virdi now lives and works. "Cities tend to make you grow vertically, forcing you to specialize in one skill set [or profession] and ignore the rest. Whereas, most of these other skills are life skills, which we ought to know. Being in a rural setting makes you grow horizontally, be a generalist, forcing you to learn the much-needed life skills and making you more complete. We have to know everything in this life, how to drive a taxi, to grow food, to clean our house, to cook, to knit, to use the Internet, to repair solar lamps – and to be entrepreneurs, carpenters and plumbers if need be."

Women in India are yet to get recognition as farmers because they do not own agricultural land. Land passes from fathers to son, yet women toil the land and produce food for their subsistence, Virdi reminds. "We women find our strength in our collective identity." With a lesser dependence on the market, women tend to exchange labour to get work done in the agricultural fields, from sowing to harvesting. This same culture of collaboration, though fast eroding, has provided a strong basis for building alliances and forging a collective strength. "Leadership, too, is seen as a function and not a position of power. A leader is situation-specific and is like a wave that rises when its time comes and subsides to make way for the next."

### **Overcoming fears opens new opportunities**

Overcoming fear has been an important contributor to Virdi's journey. "Growing up in Delhi in the 1970s was not easy. The city can be rough for a young woman moving out of her home. It was an everyday struggle just to keep my physical integrity and yet be able to be out there, doing things I wanted to. Your family fears for you, and that fear restricts and controls you. I guess every woman in every family would have had to contend with such issues and either acquiesce or carry a deep anger within."

Challenges of a different type have been encountered in making a success of the community-run tourism enterprise through village homestays for travellers to this Himalayan village. Once unheard of, homestays is now a familiar term in her neighbourhood. "One of the main challenges faced was the fear of not being able to work as a team," she recalls. "Because it's not just about the money. There is a code that we have evolved over time through all our struggles and celebrations: *Dukh-Sukh ka Rishta*. It means that *sukh* should not be only when there is cash earned and profit involved, but that the homestay host families should maintain a strong link between this livelihood and conservation of the forest commons."

"*Dukh* is the constant struggle to balance the larger common good and individual aspirations and be willing to stand up to fight for something beyond one's own immediate needs. But I think it is also easier said than done. On top of that, we as humans seem to have the wrong perception that nature is limitless. The tourism industry has commodified the human urge to travel, with little concern for the pressure they put on landscapes they pass through. We welcome travellers to our landscape but make sure that the tread is a gentle one and does not end up cutting the branch we are sitting on. The second challenge was to ensure that the benefits from this community enterprise are broad-based and not cornered by the privileged few. The forest, the water, the natural beauty of the landscape are owned as a commons by the people of the region."

### **We fight so that love may live on this earth**

The ongoing development of India's women's movement is a fundamental priority for Virdi. Without this, the opportunities and spaces that more women need to emerge and develop as leaders will be constrained and the necessary actions by governments at all levels will not eventuate.

Virdi says she sees the women's movement growing in rural India and in the smaller towns across the country. "While issues such as sexuality, legal battles, policy interventions and women's representation in the political mainstream

remain the concerns of urban women, it is the increased involvement in local self-government and determining the kind of 'development' they need, that are increasingly the concerns of women in rural areas. In this context, it is vital that women, including agricultural workers, are recognized as farmers; that women's unpaid caregiving work is recognized and not necessarily 'monetized;' and that systemic violence against women in the family and society are named and addressed."

"Working for change almost always faces resistance from the established order and it can often seem that being a part of the women's movement involves going from one fight to another. But for me, it is the old movement song that sums it up: 'We fight, so that love may live on this earth...'"



## Manohari Doss India

Co-founder of the Institute for Self Management with her late husband, Edward Doss, in 1982. The Institute includes the Women Development Resource Centre and the Tamil Nadu Labourers Union. Both programmes work with Tamil Nadu Dalit (untouchable) and hill tribe (indigenous) women and their families.

Active member of Tamil Nadu regional women's alliances at the national level.

Recipient of a Laureate prize from the Women's World Summit Foundation in Geneva, in 2000.

Subject of a 2004 documentary on the work of the Women Development Resource Centre.

State-level convener of the Tamil Nadu Social Action Movement, which involves about 1,000 NGOs, including the Institute for Self Management. The Tamil Nadu Labourers Union belongs to the New Trade Union Initiative, the ASEAN Cooperative Forum and the National Alliance of Women's Organizations.

Holds a Bachelor of Science in Social Work from Gandhigram Rural Institute in Gandhigram, India.



“When people start to speak up for rights and have respect for themselves... this is exciting and rewarding.”

### Opening new horizons for the most marginalized in Tamil Nadu<sup>17</sup>

It is 35 years since Manohari Doss and her husband, Edward Doss (now deceased), established the Institute for Self Management,

<sup>17</sup> Those interviewed: Manohari Doss, individually and then in a group of senior staff. The senior staff involved were S. K. Pandey, N. Sundararaj, Victoria, Muthulakshmi, Indra, Kasthuri, Kalaiselvi. Additional input was provided in the course of 30 meetings with more than 700 people as part of a wider review of the work of the Self Management Institute, the Women Development Resource Centre and the Tamil Nadu Labourers Union.



the Women Development Resource Centre and the Tamil Nadu Labourers Union, based in Madurai and working across parts of Tamil Nadu State in India. In that time, thousands of Dalits and hill tribe people improved their circumstances, sense of confidence and skill levels. Among other significant achievements: The Resource Centre and Labourers Union, along with multiple microcredit schemes, workers cooperatives and unions and a Women Labourers Bank were established; housing, income and savings levels improved; thousands of young people received an education; access to welfare rights increased; annual women's conventions were organized and submissions on gender policies were made to government bodies, such as the National Women's Commission.

Doss describes her work as “a grass-roots approach that combines micro and macro issues”. She sees two things as critical to the progress she has been a part of: (i) strategic gender needs being met, for example, discrimination being removed and valuing women's labour and (ii) practical gender needs being met, such as housing, employment and access to water.

Through Doss's leadership, the Women Development Resource Centre uses three main approaches (i) community development, (ii) connecting people with their legal rights and (iii) working with other like-minded NGOs and individuals to influence state and national government policy and practice.

Starting with women's *sanghams* (groups) in rural and urban Tamil Nadu, the Resource Centre encourages women to identify what is most important to them – often better education for their children and the opportunity for real job choices, improved access to health care, the ability to earn and save money, to remove dependence on moneylenders and middlemen, to have secure housing and to no longer be afraid. As well as providing training and support to the *sanghams*, the Resource Centre brings group members together to share experience, lobby and to learn about legal rights and opportunities in standing for local government elections. People learn to lead through this training and practice.

The Labourers Union helps workers form unions and cooperatives. Between 2014 and 2017, five

cooperatives were created, involving 500 people, complete with governance structures, elected leaders and business plans. The Labourers Union always exceeds its targets for membership. According to Doss, “Once the ball gets rolling and people see the benefits, others join – overcoming their natural hesitancy.”

The benefits of being part of the cooperative movement are many. These include becoming formally registered as individuals with the state government, thus gaining access to welfare schemes and then, cooperatively, gaining the skills to: form a microcredit savings group; negotiate directly with wholesalers (in buying fish from the market or buying sewing machines for a sewing cooperative, for example); cut out the loan shark middlemen with their exorbitant interest levels; save money and lobby government officials. The benefits are multilayered: individual, family, group and improved government practice.

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The benefits of being part of the cooperative movement... are multilayered: individual, family, group and improved government practice.

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The Tamil Nadu Women's Labourers Bank, a cooperative run by Dalit women that was created by the Resource Centre and the Labourers Union, provides financial support for women's income generation, business development and housing loans. The women run the bank, and the Resource Centre provides the training and practical support and opens doors to other banks and officials. Each community has a microcredit scheme that women and their families contribute to and which funds small-scale activities, like the buying of schoolbooks, paying for transport to a health care facility or investing in a small business.

The Labourers Union cooperative and union members are introduced to gender issues

through ongoing gender-sensitization training and support – bringing together the two arms of the Self Management Institute (the Labourers Union and the Women Development Resource Centre). Members also receive criteria-based no interest loans. The Labourers Union also formed a Federation of Cooperatives that brings together the leaders of cooperatives for joint planning and mutual support. Like the Resource Centre, this group of leaders meets monthly to share their knowledge and provide support and advice to one another.

Each step is a building block for larger-scale cooperative development – either through the Resource Centre or the Labourers Union, and then augmented by the Institute for Self Management, with its policy of employing Dalits. They are “walking the talk”.

“In the early days,” explains Doss, “women would say what the men wanted them to say, in door-to-door conversations. Through involvement in [the Resource Centre] and actively participating in meetings, many [women] have become leaders, speak their own minds and support other women.” When asked about Doss, members of both the Resource Centre and the Labourers Union displayed a high level of confidence and knowledge about the benefits of working together. This, coupled with the livelihood improvements, indicate good prospects for long-term sustainability for women, families and the cooperatives.

Tuition centres for children set up in association with the cooperatives are now seeing some Dalit children beginning to shine in school – and working against the prejudices of Dalit children typically being made to sit at the back of the classroom and clean the toilets. With longer-term change in view, the Resource Centre and the Labourers Union worked in 2016 with the Government’s Labour Commission at the national and state levels to significantly improve working conditions and wage rates for Dalits. The Labourers Union is now engaging with other cooperatives and union groups to push for needed legislative changes and strengthening links with government departments to facilitate the changes.

## **Leading by developing the leadership of others**

Doss is most proud of the tangible differences she sees in individuals and whole groups of women – their improved competence and confidence, occupational and organizational skills and the sense of hope of greater options for their children. “When people start to speak up for rights and have respect for themselves, and women take the necessary steps to solve their own problems – together and individually, fighting for rights – staging protests, presenting demands, explaining grievances, stepping up against domestic violence and starting to become involved with politics ... this is exciting and rewarding,” says Doss. “Women making their own decisions, supporting other women in trouble rather than putting them down and being able to forecast and manage household budgets” is my reward. The whole approach of the Women Development Resource Centre and the Tamil Nadu Labourers Union is for this self-leadership to be supported by a community.

Doss leads a team of more than 30 persons, with regular and frequent staff meetings that incorporate leadership training. She ensures that her senior management team is the first point of contact for community members and officials. She provides backup when needed. Support from her staff is wholehearted. They see Doss as bringing an open, engaging, empathetic and egalitarian approach to leadership. They see her as visionary and practical – afraid of no one yet respectful of all and always well prepared for any situation. She is described as flexible and adaptable and, while being firm about vision and principles, open to the means of turning vision into action. Her “no-blame” perspective encourages participation.

“We feel backed-up and supported. This leads us to be more creative, courageous and effective,” praises a staff member. Doss’s senior management team attribute her success to her outlook: “She is always thinking about how to overcome problems. She is very solution oriented and has the communication skills to deal with all sorts of people. She is highly respected by government officials. She is able to judge well people’s talents,



capability and commitment.” Team leader S. K. Pandey adds: “When you throw the ball at the wall, it bounces back. With Doss, there is always a positive outcome – the ball doesn’t stick on the wall.”

### **Early experience has lifelong influence**

Doss’s leadership journey began in her early experience of hardship as one of five children of small-holding farmers, reinforced by the experience of prejudice towards her husband, Edward, a Dalit. Among eight children, Edward was chosen by the family as the one they could afford to educate. He went on to graduate as a lawyer and earn other degrees. While Doss was deeply influenced by her social work training, both of them were driven by their commitment to change: for Dalit and hill tribe people to have real choices and chances in life.

Drawing from her own experience, Doss believes deeply in the power of learning and education to ensure that people have choices in life. She attributes this drive to her parents, especially her father, who insisted that she and her three sisters be educated as well as her brother at a time when it was often only boys who went to secondary school and university. Now, both of Doss and Edward’s daughters are doctors, with one specializing in dentistry.

An important catalyst in Doss’s development as a leader was the close, supportive network of seven other women NGO leaders who met each other in the 1980s. Together, they connected with a wider group of NGOs within Tamil Nadu and nationally to influence policy and the Government’s international commitments. Doss continues to actively contribute to the Tamil Nadu women’s movement, including conducting a stocktake of issues for discussion with the Government.

International partnerships have also been an important enabler in Doss’s leadership development, particularly long-term support from the New Zealand Government and NGOs as well as the links they all helped to facilitate. Locally, individuals, such as bank managers, government officials and lawyers, have helped to open doors

and advocate for the work of the Resource Centre and the Labourers Union.

### **Challenges facing women and civil society intensifying**

At every step in her leadership journey, Doss has had to confront and navigate both deeply embedded gender norms and the additional prejudice and marginalization that Dalits endure in Tamil Nadu. Despite the achievements of the Resource Centre and the Labourers Union, which, step by step, are contributing to a wider movement of social change, the scale of the issues means that major challenges remain. These include cultural beliefs that women should not be allowed out of the house, and Dalit women’s own view of themselves, which is essentially fear-based, feeling inferior and insecure. “Dalit or tribal women and girls still do the dirty work and are exploited by higher castes. There is a culture of silence,” says Doss.

She describes the tension that arises when couples marry outside their caste, leading to beatings, torture and death. The women’s movement in Madurai has sought new legislation to prevent caste deaths, including banning the sale of acid (because it is used so frequently to throw on women). The top fines for rape of Dalit women are low, and it is hard for Dalit and tribal women to prove rape. The 1989 legislation protecting Dalits and Tribal people against atrocities is barely used.

In this environment, Doss says that political parties give false promises and play on people’s fears. As well, there are other political changes occurring, with a squeezing of civil society space that makes the activity of organizations, such as the Resource Centre and the Labourers Union, more difficult. Despite legislative requirements, various levels of the Tamil Nadu government are becoming slower in providing information on the formation of, and then advice to, cooperatives. There is increasing scrutiny of NGOs receiving funding from overseas sources, and permission for demonstrations in public areas is now rarely given. Media coverage of the issues that Dalits and poor women experience is also declining, despite the proactive efforts of the Resource Centre and Tamil Nadu Labourers Union.

## Government has a fundamental role in bringing about multigenerational change

Doss sees her work as being long term because the causes are multigenerational and culturally ingrained. Thus, she sees the Sustainable Development Goals as critical as a basis for lobbying the state and national governments and holding them accountable, such as through a gender budget, which she considers is long overdue in India. Doss says that while the central Government has great policies, few resources are allocated for follow-up.

She is keen for training of government staff on gender, Dalit and Tribal issues increased and built into public service professional development. The Resource Centre has conducted gender training with the police and government officials, especially in relation to domestic violence. She knows that training can make a difference, particularly when there is relevant legislation to connect with the training, which is the case of domestic violence.

Doss is determined that current trends towards restricting the activities of independent civil society organizations will not impede the emergence of women leaders. “The cooperatives, unions and *sanghams* are the place where many Dalit women learn their skills and find confidence,” says Doss. “We will ensure that structural and cultural restrictions on their ability to develop, to be effective and to grow are challenged and that our work continues.” Government legislation and practice will remain vital to ensuring that this space is protected and expanded, she emphasizes.

## India’s Dalit and Tribal peoples

Dalit (“untouchable”) and Tribal (indigenous) people are two of India’s poorest and most disadvantaged groups. The Hindu caste system has long been used to regulate economic life in India, despite legislation from 1947 onwards that constitutionally provides for equality. Dalits are trapped at the bottom in what is, in effect, a rigid occupational hierarchy. They work as scavengers, labourers, in quarries and on cremation sites, in low paid – or even unpaid – jobs that are considered “unclean”. Tribal people live in scattered groups in remote corners and hilly forest regions of India, scraping a subsistence living by gathering forest produce (nuts, fruit or grasses) and in cottage industries.

Most Dalits and Tribal people are landless, own no assets and have high rates of indebtedness and illiteracy. About half of them live on income below the poverty line, on less than \$1 a day. Access to transport and markets is often marginal or non-existent. Their plight is intergenerational.\* Within this social system, Dalit women are at the bottom. Daily rape is common, with a sense of being “owned” by higher caste groups. For Dalit families in rural Tamil Nadu, landlords have “access” to women, even if they are married, as a “right”. This can be at home or in the field. If women raise concerns, they are victimized.

Dalit people account for 21 per cent of Tamil Nadu’s population, with an even larger proportion in rural Tamil Nadu (at 25.6 per cent).\*\* Tamil Nadu Dalits continue to be at the receiving end of discrimination and atrocities.

\*= V. Sheela, “Poverty among tribals of Tamil Nadu”, In *Dalits and Tribes of India*, J. Kanmony, ed. (New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2010) pp. 229–230.

\*\*=See <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/its-now-dalits-vs-nondalits/article7386959.ece>.

*Maria Fides Bagasao*  
Philippines

Grass-roots community organizer in the Philippines since the late 1970s, supporting rural and urban poor communities to develop independent people's organizations and coalitions as well as serving as a trainer for young community organizers.

Served since 2010 in the Coordinating Council of the global Huairou Commission,<sup>18</sup> for which she has worked since its founding years during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and Habitat II in Istanbul in 1996. Served as one of the four co-chairs for the NGO Forum at Habitat 2.

Served as Executive Committee member of the Huairou Commission, 2014–2017. Currently adviser for the Huairou Commission Asia Regional Coordinating Council.

Social researcher and author, linking grass-roots activism with global policy.

Co-founder and former Board member of Asian NGO Center.

Served as Executive Board member for Urban Poor Associates.

Served as Executive of the Leaders and Organizers of Community Organizations in Asia, based in Seoul, Republic of Korea and Quezon City, Philippines, from November 2006 to October 2010.

Co-convened first national assembly of grass-roots women leaders and NGO support groups in Philippines affiliated with GROOTS, the global grass-roots coalition under the Huairou Commission to support women in leadership at the community level.

Co-founder and former Executive Director of Community Organizers Multiversity, a capacity-building institution for training organizers to support the establishment of independent people's organizations for empowerment of marginalized communities in the Philippines.

Named 2005 Outstanding Citizen of the Philippines Province of Nueva Ecija for Community Organizing.

Holds a Master of Arts in Sociology and a Bachelor of Science in Social Work from the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

Recipient of fellowships for certificate courses from the Asian Institute of Management, in 1995, and Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, in 2007.



**“Learn from, trust and value the knowledge and capacities of those who are excluded.”**

18 The Huairou Commission supports the empowerment of grass-roots women, including leadership and visibility in various levels of decision-making crucial to their homes and communities. The Commission is a global coalition that works with grass-roots groups and NGOs in Asia, the Pacific, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, North America, the Czech Republic and Turkey. The Commission brings a particular focus on community-based organizing as a basis for leadership development, facilitates peer-to-peer learning and local-to-local dialogues. The latter is a process through which grass-roots women empower themselves, work in solidarity and form coalitions with other grass-roots organizations, transform community processes, learn to negotiate and discover their power to take responsibility for their own lives and communities. Substantive focus areas include economic empowerment, land, housing and community resilience. Transforming power relations and valuing local knowledge are fundamental drivers.

## Empowering marginalized communities and promoting women's grass-roots leadership

“Grass-roots women everywhere are breaking the chains that exclude them,” insists Maria Fides Bagasao. “They are learning from their experiences to be resourceful and resilient, to work and grow together and to focus on changing the things that matter to their lives and those of their communities.”

As a community organizer and leader in her home country as well as a leader, network builder, researcher and author internationally, Bagasao demonstrates a well-documented track record of working to empower marginalized communities and promote women's grass-roots leadership. She has been an influential facilitator in the campaigns and initiatives of grass-roots women in areas ranging from housing rights and women's economic empowerment to combating community evictions in Asian cities and supporting locally driven disaster response and climate change action in rural and urban Philippines.

Qualities in her “servant-leadership” approach are the valuing of the knowledge, experience and transformative potential of grass-roots women; a focus on peer learning, networking and collective action; and linking local issues and activities with national and international mutual support networks and processes. An increasingly important aspect of the latter has been a number of initiatives to translate the Sustainable Development Goals into local contexts as an important lever for change in the hands of grass-roots women leaders and community organizations.

“Grass-roots is a term that has been appropriated by others for their own purposes and lost much of its meaning and authenticity,” says Bagasao. “In the Huairou Commission, we are working to reclaim the integrity of the term. For us, it encompasses low-income women, rural or urban, who are excluded from decision-making processes in their communities, despite rich experiences in their struggle for daily survival.”

A core platform for the work of the Commission and Bagasao in this context is GROOTS International: Grassroots Organizations Operating

Together in Sisterhood. GROOTS was formed in 1989 to promote women's voices in decision-making processes that affect their lives and their communities. GROOTS International with others (like the Women and Habitat Network, the International Council of Women and WEDO) joined together to ensure that the issues women were dealing with in their homes and communities were addressed at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995. At the global NGO Forum in Huairou town, outside Beijing, GROOTS and the other groups set up a tent for grass-roots women groups. UN Habitat Executive Director Wally N'Dow challenged the groups to form a coalition to focus on women, homes and communities. Bagasao was one of the four co-chairs for the NGO Forum at Habitat II, which followed in Istanbul in 1996 and co-convened the first Philippines national assembly of grass-roots women leaders and NGO support groups affiliated with GROOTS. The latter became a member of the Huairou Commission, which evolved from these developments.

## Exclusion and power as themes in daily work

A number of themes emerged in Bagasao's work on a recurring basis, whether at home in the Philippines, in South-East Asia or globally. First and foremost was the almost universal exclusion of grass-roots women from the political discourse and processes that shape their environment. “Working alongside grass-roots women to ensure their voices help shape decisions that affect them and their communities is thus our primary driver,” says Bagasao. The crucial importance of land ownership is a second recurrent issue, as a source of livelihoods, sustenance and security. “Across our region, women face systemic barriers to both owning land and having a say about its use.” A third issue is the development of community-led strategies for climate change and disaster resilience, which have emerged as a priority agenda that is closely interconnected with development processes and reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Grass-roots women's daily experience of violence is another consistent theme, whether at the personal level through domestic assault and rape or at a collective level through mass evictions from their homes to make way for elite-

driven urban developments. Violence against women arising from displacement due to the impact of climate change-induced disasters is increasing the vulnerability and risks for women and girls. Above all, says Bagasao, what stands out from her own and colleagues' experiences as community organizers and facilitators is the "resilience, courage, inclusivity and determination of grass-roots women and their capacity to link with wider issues and processes and make a difference that goes far beyond their own families and communities."

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Violence against women arising from displacement due to the impact of climate change-induced disasters is increasing the vulnerability and risks for women and girls.

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### **Strategies and tools for change**

Several core strategies inform the work of Bagasao and other leaders with the Huairou Commission and the leaders and organizers in community organizations in Asia. Among them are (i) strengthening grass-roots women's leadership and visibility in their own communities as well as various advocacy and decision-making arenas; (ii) building grass-roots constituencies for advocacy; (iii) linking to wider networks, partners and allies for sharing lessons as well as mutual learning and support; (v) delivering results that tangibly benefit communities and work for a larger vision of change; (vi) working on a platform or collective basis, not on a one-to-one basis; (vii) women-led mapping of local community resilience and risks; (viii) local-to-local dialogues to support grass-roots women's efforts in post-conflict and community development; (ix) the convening of larger (including regional) forums to build mutual support

and learning networks, as well as to support host country actions and participation in international advocacy; (x) convening regional and national grass-roots academies to facilitate learning from the experiences of grass-roots leaders; and (xi) advocacy for decentralized funding for community-led disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and community resilience development.

Through all these strategies and tools, says Bagasao, "we are seeking to enhance the space for the power and influence of grass-roots women's own voices and knowledge to be influential and to co-create better futures for their communities."

### **Giving life to the Sustainable Development Goals in communities**

The impact of these approaches can be seen in Huairou Commission initiatives to make the Sustainable Development Goals resonate at the local level. "The SDGs are not well known to community leaders and groups and can be too big to grasp at that level. Our strategy is to help them link to everyday issues and local politics – with people engaging not as beneficiaries but as rights holders." The Huairou Commission has localized Sustainable Development Goal-related pilot projects in 16 countries, engaging with grass-roots women's leaders and groups, broader community processes, researchers and local government authorities.

Within the Philippines and member organizations of Huairou Commission in Asia, Bagasao has worked alongside selected communities to build resilience and localize the 17 goals in the context of natural disasters, the New Urban Agenda of Habitat III and the United Nations Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

Through community discussion, local priorities are determined, resources and capacities are mapped, protocols, such as monthly meetings, are developed, and links are developed with other communities and local government counterparts. "From there, we support larger community gatherings and dialogue. This leads to a national consultation to enable groups to deepen and consolidate their understandings and collectively strategize how to institutionalize partnerships,



...TOWN HOTEL BANGKOK

-organised by:FRSN, LOCOA, DAMPA-Groots, Phils, and

HUAIROU COMMISSION



particularly at the local government level. These aim to ensure the SDG priorities for grass-roots women and their communities will be part of the agenda and budget of local governments. At all stages, links with relevant SDGs are made to make them alive and relevant. Ultimately, the process links to the regional and global events in which the Huairou Commission and GROOTS are active.”

### **Moments and influences on the leadership journey**

Several crucial turning points influenced Bagasao’ leadership journey and reinforced her commitment to serving grass-roots women. In one of those points she was standing in a queue for water in a local community in the Philippines. “Poor women were lining up for water, with their husbands at home waiting to have their bath. A gangster was robbing them in the line. So the women were caught between threats of violence both in the line and at home. This brought home to me the power dynamics in the lives of grass-roots women. I have been humbled and inspired by the dignity and strength of women leaders who also became my friends. They are affected by marginalization and violence throughout their lives, yet overcome these to lead their communities to change and improvement of their conditions.”

Another moment that stands out was a conversation with a small boy running through the drains in his village after a rain storm. “I asked him what he was doing. He says he was gathering mud to help his father fix his family home.” It was a stark and motivating reminder of the huge gulf between rich and poor, she says.

Bagasao’ father was also an important influence. Her parents grew up in the same locality as Ferdinand Marcos, later the country’s president who imposed dictatorial rule on the Philippines for 14 years. “My family had links with the Marcos family, and my father went to the same law school as the late president. When, under martial law, the Marcos government pressured judicial courts to legalize taking over huge tracts of land, my father stood up to him. That was an important influence on my later life.” Bagasao didn’t follow her father’s professional footsteps, but he supported her when she chose to study social work and become a community organizer. “His only reminder to me

was to remember that he was the one who grew the rice.”

Like many young people in the Philippines in that era, Bagasao became part of an influential movement of community organizers. Inspired by the commitment of their teachers to social justice, “we saw our role as part of the community and the community as part of who we are – the community will care for your welfare as you care for theirs.” Also, like so many of her generation, she was profoundly influenced by the sense of people’s power and possibility that came with the toppling of the Marcos dictatorship by a massive uprising in the streets of Manila in 1986.

The experience of lives being transformed through community action, resilience and peer support reinforced Fide’s commitment to leadership, anchored in and serving the community. “I remember one experience of working among former combatants in the Mindanao conflict and seeing the potential for transformation by building trust and serving people’s everyday needs. In the end, the combatants put down their arms and returned to their farms. Just like the rest of marginalized communities in Philippines and elsewhere, peace and development require essentials: security, access to the land, shelter, basic services and meaningful participation in decision-making on issues affecting their lives. Peace and development can take place when women are central to the process. After all, they make up half or, at times, more in any community.”

Inspiration also came from countless experiences and stories of women in the Philippines and worldwide “doing it on their own, making changes for themselves, their families and their communities through their resilience and determination and working together”.

Reflecting on her leadership journey, Bagasao observed that “I started more instinctively, responding to the issues that were confronting people close by. Now, like many others I have worked with, I am more strategic and purposeful and able to see the linkages with the wider power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in society – in my own community and country, across the region and globally. This now very much shapes the way I work.”

## **Climate change response demonstrates influence of grass-roots women's leadership**

The impacts of climate change on grass-roots women and girls across Asia and the Pacific have become a priority of the Huairou Commission and Bagasao. “Women and girls are not intrinsically vulnerable to climate change, but their social, economic and political conditions make them more susceptible to risks and vulnerabilities,” she says, quoting from experts on resilient development and grass-roots women’s priorities. “As their communities are facing increased risks to homes and livelihoods in daily life, women and girls are expected to spend more of their day to gather water and food while still caring for their immediate and extended families.”

The approach taken by Huairou Commission is to turn a growing threat into an opportunity – not only to establish more sustainable lifestyles but also to reverse the social, economic and political conditions that hold back women and their communities. “Often, women are the ones who experience the impact of climate change the most sharply due to their roles in the community and local agriculture. There are many examples in our work where women have taken the lead in promoting more sustainable use of the natural resources on which communities depend and are increasingly raising their voices in local political processes about challenges to water supplies, food sources and livelihoods. Their efforts to reverse

these vulnerabilities in the face of climate change can be given additional visibility by linking with the SDGs, which all governments have signed up to.”

## **Never underestimate the power of collective action**

Looking back on her own experiences, Bagasao highlights lessons for emerging women leaders today. “Wherever you are, start from what is around you and make every experience a learning opportunity. Learn from, trust and value the knowledge and capacities of those who are excluded; be alert to the power dynamics that exclude women and others in any situation; put your skills and passions at the service of others; reach out to others with similar concerns and dreams; and never underestimate the power for transformation of people working together locally, nationally and internationally.”

At a more systemic level, Bagasao highlights the need to accelerate the transition to development models that promote environmental sustainability and resilience and eliminate the exploitation of women and girls. “It is urgent that governments incorporate gender perspectives into their national policies and action plans, informed by the voices and perspectives of women leader at all levels, backed up by good sex-disaggregated data. Grass-roots voices and leaders from all parts of society have a vital role to play in creating this new future.”

**Nazma Akter**  
Bangladesh

Founder and President of Sommito Garments Sramik Federation, a union with more than 70,000 garment workers as members, mainly women.

Co-chair of the IndustriALL Global Union women's committee for the Asia-Pacific region.

Founder, General Secretary and Executive Director of AWAJ Foundation, a grass-roots NGO delivering training on Bangladeshi labour laws, personal health, hygiene and occupational health and safety to thousands of female garment workers in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Attended the fourth Annual Summit of Global Female Leaders.



**“Nothing can stop my work to achieve my dream of a safe workplace and equal opportunities for all...”**

**From 11-year-old garment factory worker to globally respected union leader**

Nazma Akter began working in 1986 as a Dhaka garment factory as an 11-year-old helper to her mother. The work involved long hours and low pay. “At that time, laws and regulations on a safe working environment did not exist. Workers were treated as machines. We were just there to make the business a profit. I used to think, ‘We are workers, not slaves. Why are they depriving us?’ In 1987, Akter joined a protest against working conditions in her factory. She was beaten up by hired thugs and teargassed by the police.

Seven years later and frustrated by the failure of the male-dominated unions to serve the interests of garment sector worker as well as by their close ties with factory owners, corrupt officials and politicians, Akter formed her own union, the Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation. When she was 19, “I decided I had to do something. I believed that to make a difference, I had to fight for our legal rights,” says Akter.

The Sramik Federation, which is affiliated with the IndustriALL global union, now has a membership of more than 70,000 women garment workers. They rally together to ensure their rights in the workplace, government and wider society. This includes addressing the discrimination that women in garment sector continue to experience. Akter also has been a member of the government Minimum Wage Board since 2006, working to progressively lift the minimum wage.

### **Expanding advocacy and outreach for workers’ rights**

In 2003, Akter, together with a group of other former garment workers, established the AWAJ Foundation to expand and strengthen advocacy and programmes for workers’ rights. Since then, AWAJ (which means “voice” in Bangla) has provided legal assistance to address more than 40,000 worker complaints regarding withheld benefits and payments; successfully mediated more than 30,000 complaints with factory management; assisted workers to receive compensation through labour court decisions; provided free health care to almost 25,000 regular patients; and provided training to hundreds of thousands of workers on leadership, health awareness, the Labour Law, occupational safety and health and trade union activities. AWAJ also established 27 women’s cafes, where tired garment workers can relax and access legal advice and basic health care services. AWAJ also provides weekly training in IT, tailoring, dance, singing and adult literacy.

After the death of some 1,200 mostly female garment workers following the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Dhaka in 2013, Akter became an outspoken presence across the nation and to the world on the issues that led to the tragedy and the need for change. “There have been many improvements since then,” she

says. “Female workers are raising their voice with greater confidence and negotiating with management; there has been an increase in collective bargaining; many new unions have been registered, factory safety committees have been established, and there are improved fire and safety inspections. We are now campaigning both locally and internationally. But many serious issues still remain. One of these is workers’ health, especially reproductive health. Healthy workers and a healthy environment are vital to our futures. We are not cheap labour. We are skilled human resources. We deserve respect and dignity.”

### **Keeping the focus where the issues are the sharpest**

As her leadership, influence and profile grew at home and abroad, Akter’s focus stayed at the grass-roots and factory floor, where the issues are the sharpest. Noting that many activists in Bangladesh come from wealthy backgrounds and are not well connected to the lives and realities of the majority of the population who are poor, Akter believes that “encouraging and supporting other women who are just like me is very important. I can be a mentor and role model to others, promoting the belief that ‘women can’.”

Leadership training for grass-roots women is a core focus in the work of Sramik Federation and the AWAJ Foundation. “We provide support and training through on-the-job support, mentoring, the use of role plays, giving responsibility in the workplace and the community and providing access to informal education. This begins with small groups and expands, small, step by step, linking with bigger movements in Bangladesh and internationally.” At same time, says Akter, “it is important to be an example of responsible and credible leadership, open to working constructively with others, taking into account issues such as improving productivity and doing our own jobs well.”

### **Mentors, partners and need for change**

Many factors have supported Akter in her leadership journey. Mentors among the women in the union movement have been important, as



has the support of trade unions worldwide and women's networks, such as the Asia Pacific Forum for Women, Law and Development, based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The international links bring solidarity and access to knowledge, experience and international leverage, Akter emphasizes.

Some men in the union movement and community are supportive, too, she adds. They provide important links with other men who are working for change in the lives of poor workers and their communities. "There is a need for collective actions to sensitize male counterparts and create a conducive environment and opportunities for women's participation."

First and foremost, however, Akter's motivation for her life's work derives from the conditions she endured as a girl working in a garment factory; the continued suffering and struggles of women in the industry and across Bangladesh society; and the many achievements she has seen in lives transformed because of new opportunities created for many of society's poorest and most marginalized women. "Bangladesh is the second-largest garment exporter in the world, with its predominantly female workforce," she says. "I see an opportunity for women to become stronger financially. These women are already contributing to our GDP, they are getting ready to be involved in decision-making processes and to break their silence. This is the main motivation in my campaign for workers' rights."

### **Challenging entrenched interests puts life at risk**

The challenges Akter has faced have been tough, relentless, unfair and even criminal. When she began to organize for change in her factory, life was hard. "I was out organizing very early in the morning and late at night. Men would harass and abuse me, treating me as a sex worker. I was treated as a 'bad girl' by my employers, male workers and even my family and relatives. Neighbours even spread rumours about me in my community. For this reason, my father and uncle didn't want me involved in these activities any longer. When I became known as a leader, I lost my job, had no money and found it hard to get work. Most men don't like outspoken women who fight for women's rights, for an end to violence against women, for equal treatment in the workplace and

for dignity and respect. They expect me to be quiet and obedient."

At times even, Akter's life was at risk. "I was threatened by my boss, police, the local muscle man. I had my phone calls tapped, and my movement was restricted," she says. "I have had cases filed against me. I am always under observation constantly by the authorities. Our office has been attacked, and we have been beaten. These are the things that personally I face." The underlying issue behind such threats and resistance to her role is power, says Akter. "This includes both the power of men over women in society, including within unions, which are dominated by men, and our own collective power as women and workers to have control over own life and future."

Despite the threats and abuse, Akter stayed true to her course. "I am happy in the work I am doing and the achievements I have been a part of. Nothing can stop my work to achieve my dream of a safe workplace and equal opportunities for all to be part of leadership and decision-making, particularly for women in society."

### **Emerging young women leaders a vivacious factor in reshaping the future**

There are still many issues to be resolved before this dream can be realized, says Akter. These range from improving the position of Bangladesh's millions of informal workers to organizing democratic unions; creating decent and safe jobs; addressing sexual abuse and violence; improving the situation of migrant workers everywhere; and protecting the rights of domestic workers, who are often in dangerous situations.

Akter highlights many areas in which government policy and action can make a difference to the lives and prospects of women in Bangladesh by creating more opportunities for women to emerge and develop as leaders. Raising the minimum wage to increase income security is one. At US\$68 per month, Bangladesh's minimum wage is one of the lowest in the world. "Many workers lose their ability to work past the age of 45 and have no savings for retirement," says Akter. "In the garment industry and across our society, we want to see a living wage, decent living conditions,

safe accommodation, freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and negotiation and improved education, health care and pension schemes. All these changes will help create better opportunities for more women to become leaders in society.”

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Governments can also make a difference by establishing more effective public institutions for the protection and promotion of human rights, including labour rights; delivering important services, such as vocational and technical skills training; strengthening good governance by improving transparency and addressing corruption; and implementing international labour standards and protecting people’s right to decent work.

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International organizations, businesses and informed consumers are necessary for real change. “Women and workers are paying with their blood and sweat so consumers can enjoy cheap fashion,” says Akter. “I don’t believe anyone really wants that. We all need to be able to eat well, have a decent life with access to education and health care.”

“In all these areas, we need to promote and support young women leaders,” says Akter. “We need to work with them to solve the problems they face where they are in the factories and community. It is also important for governments to demonstrate respect for those who are facing discrimination and working for improvements in their lives. They should actively encourage and support women in leadership at all levels of society and implement their international commitments to gender equality.”

Akter says she has great hopes and expectations for the future. “A lot depends on our next generation. Today’s young activists will someday take our place. I want their actions to be honest, fair and accountable. I don’t want to see them involved in dirty business. I am doing my very best to make this dream of mine come true.”



*Pansy Tun Thein*  
Myanmar

Founding member and former Co-Chair of the Gender Equality Network.

Currently National Adviser to the Gender Equality Network and executive director of the Local Resource Centre.

Formerly Assistant Representative of the United Nations Population Fund Myanmar, from 2000 to 2012.

Holds a Master in Public Health from Walden University, USA; a Graduate Diploma in Library Science from the University of North Carolina, USA; and a Bachelor of Science in Social Work from the University of the Philippines.



**“We shared a common vision and commitment, learned together and supported each other.”**

**Crisis provides catalyst in leadership journey<sup>19</sup>**

When Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar in 2008, Pansy Tun Thein was propelled into the centre of the response. “Women were badly affected by the cyclone, especially pregnant women. There were many stories of rape and sexual violence,” says Thein. “At the time, I was Assistant Representative of the UN Population Fund in Myanmar. A decade of working in this role had empowered me and

<sup>19</sup> Group discussion: May Sabe Phyu, Director of the GEN Coordination Unit; Su Nge, GEN Steering Committee member; Poe Ei Phyu, GEN Steering Committee member; Hnin Shwe Zin Hlaing, Programme Manager, with the Coordination Unit.

equipped me with leadership skills, not only in leading the organization, but also in taking leadership in advocating for issues of importance, such as reproductive rights of women, women empowerment and gender equality.”

Thein’s combination of leadership skills and institutional experience put her at the forefront of efforts to ensure that the needs of women and girls were not neglected by government, civil society organization and international interventions. She was influential in the establishment of the Women’s Protection Technical Working Group, which provided the platform for originating the Gender Equality Network (GEN) as a diverse national network for gender equality in all spheres of society.

In her new role as a civil society leader, Thein served as the GEN co-chair for four years and now mentors the next generation of GEN leaders as National Adviser. In a few short years since its establishment, GEN has been instrumental in putting gender equality onto the national policy agenda. “This was a new concept in Myanmar at that time,” observes Thein. “Now we have the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, 2013–2022, a 10-year policy document to ensure women empowerment and gender equality, which GEN played an important role in developing.

Hundreds of women have been trained in leadership across the country. Public awareness campaigns all over the country have raised the profile of gender inequality and gender-based violence. We are leading the movement to introduce a Protection and Prevention of Violence against Women Law. Women and men leaders are now speaking out as public role models.” In 2017, the Government supported a national Women’s Week for the first time, including a two-hour debate on gender issues in parliament, initiated by GEN.

### **From follower to leader**

A number of factors encouraged Thein’s emergence and development as a leader within GEN and broader civil society in Myanmar, enabling her to seize the opportunities that emerged in the midst of the Cyclone Nargis crisis and overcome the challenges of gender norms that regard leadership as a male preserve. As well as the experience

and training gained through her role in the United Nations Population Fund, the opportunities and space provided by the support of her family and friends and the chance to study and work abroad heavily factored in. The latter contributed to a broader understanding of society and the ability to communicate effectively with a wide range of local and international actors.

“Early on, I was never the leader but more of a follower in my family and at school. I was more engrossed with following instructions to make sure everyone is happy and contented in reaching the goal together,” says Thein. When she entered the workforce, she was struck by the prevalence of gender-based discrimination and issues, such as unequal pay and “glass ceiling” restrictions on women’s options.

“I especially noticed that when women become pregnant, they tend to leave jobs because of either lack of maternity leave or inadequate leave. This was especially hard for mothers wanting to choose exclusive breastfeeding. These factors actually triggered my interest to work for women’s rights and gender equality issues. After years of addressing these issues on an ad hoc basis, I realized the inadequacy of this approach and the need to address these issues at national level. This was made possible through the Gender Equality Network.”

As Thein’s role developed through the Cyclone Nargis response and creation of GEN being part of a broader collective process was an immense source of inspiration but also feedback and learning. “We shared a common vision and commitment, learned together and supported each other.” Beyond this were the “inspiration and opportunity of being part of a global movement for gender equality and being able to tap into global commitments for change at home,” she says. Such experiences provided role models at the local and international levels, contributed to self-learning and reinforced her belief that change is possible.

### **Opening opportunities for the next generation of women leaders**

A major motivation now is the need to support the emerging generation of women leaders. “In my



current role as a civil society leader,” says Thein, “I try my best to be a role model and encourage second-line leaders to improve their leadership skills through trial and errors and learning from mistakes. I believe that good followers can be good leaders, that leaders must listen to others and have empathy and that they must encourage participatory decision-making through consultation and dialogue.”

Thein believes that the biggest strategic contributions that the Government could make in creating opportunities for more women leaders to emerge would be to fully and sustainably implement the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women and support the GEN campaign for at least 30 per cent of leaders in all spheres and levels of society to be women.

International agencies can be supportive by providing much-needed resources for an expansion of women’s leadership training, mentoring and team building. Thein advocates that leadership training for women should be provided at all levels and in all walks of life, including among communities. Such training should be conducted by local people and target potential women leaders who, in turn, can empower other women in the community through multiplier trainings.

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Leaders must listen to others...and encourage participatory decision-making through consultation and dialogue.

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“We put strong emphasis on promoting team approaches and addressing the lack of confidence that team members have to participate in decision-making,” she says. Illustrating the impact of such an approach, Thein highlights the example of a women’s group in Kayin State that grew out of a GEN leadership training and initiated a tea plantation livelihoods programme. “They are now so successful that they are exporting their products. This is economic empowerment. Some of these women are now being groomed to take up political positions by running for local level elections.”

Thein has no doubt that there is a link between economic empowerment of women and women taking leadership positions. “Economic empowerment helps women gain confidence, recognition and power within the household and community at large. With additional leadership skills trainings, these empowered women can participate in politics at both local and national levels.”

Transforming social norms with respect to leadership must also be a priority for GEN’s future efforts, says Thein. “The cultural norms perpetuated through school textbooks portray boys to be superior and the idea they are the only ones who can become leaders, while girls are portrayed as homemakers and reproductive beings.”

Looking ahead to the advice she would share from her experience with the next generation of women leaders in Myanmar, Thein emphasizes the need to “believe in yourself, be confident, have a passion for gender equality, work closely with others, be innovative and look for new ways to reach people and create space and opportunities for others to learn and grow as leaders in their own right.”

*Raushan Sarsembayeva*  
Kazakhstan

Founder and President of the Association of Business Women of Kazakhstan.

Member of the National Commission for Women, Family and Demographic Policy under the President of Kazakhstan.

Holds a Doctorate of Sociology from Narxoz University in Kazakhstan.

Author of some 100 analytical works on gender issues.



**“I advise women to take initiative and be active, not to fear to realize their own ideas.”**

**From one-women show to influential national and international figure**

Raushan Sarsembayeva is the founder and head of the Association of Business Women of Kazakhstan, which has blossomed from a “one-woman show” into a nationwide network of 18 national affiliates, more than 5,000 members and a network of NGOs throughout the country since its establishment in 1995. Three core priorities drive the Association’s work. These are the protection of entrepreneurs’ rights; improving women’s leadership knowledge and skills; and increasing support in rural areas.

Over the past two decades of working for the interests of Kazakhstan women, Sarsembayeva's leadership and vision have seen the Association become a recognized authority and social influence in the country.

Underpinning this success has been a long-term programme of gender-related research that has provided the basis for evidence-based policy advocacy and programme development. Much of this critical research has been carried by Sarsembayeva. In pursuing its agenda, the Association of Business Women works closely with the Government and the National Commission of Women Affairs, Family and Demographic Policy, of which Sarsembayeva is also a member.

Sarsembayeva highlights a number of contributions that the Association of Business Women has made under her leadership to improve opportunities and capacities for women's leadership. Core to these has been the School of Women Entrepreneurship, which opened in 2000. Some 27,000 women have participated in the school's activities through more than 750 training workshops in all regions of the country.

Starting in 2009, Clubs of Women Politicians have been established across the country to expand opportunities for the promotion of women in decision-making. These clubs have provided the basis for establishing a "personnel reserve" of women professionals to take part in decision-making processes at all levels of society.

The School of Women's Leadership is another Association initiative and reaches women in all cities and remote settlements. Special attention is paid in schools to the exchange of experience and knowledge between women.

The Association has established the annual Azhar Awards to promote achievements and public status of women professionals and their contributions to Kazakhstan's development and prosperity.

The Association of Business Women's outreach and influence have expanded internationally, including through forums titled G-global – The Role of Women in the New Economy, within the framework of the annual Astana Economic Forum, which brings together world leaders from some 100 countries in the fields of economics, politics and

science. The Association also has been an active contributor to four Eurasian Women's Summits, which aim to showcase the contribution of women within the "Eurasian space".

### **Putting young women at the centre of future plans**

Building on its achievements and experience to date, the Association plans to promote women's leadership among young women through the creation of a youth wing and an extensive mentoring programme. The youth wing is known as Jas Qanattar and includes girls and young women aged 18–35 who have a business that has been operating for six months to three years.

"Young people are the most active part of society, which reacts quickly to any changes in life and which effectively perceives the most advanced technologies," says Sarsembayeva. "We can therefore say that young people have much more potential and ability than other age groups. Involving them in leadership will help in the formation of a more developed and competitive generation to come."

### **Tackling stereotypes and the obstacles within**

Sarsembayeva notes that a number of factors have supported her leadership journey. These include the influence and support of her mother in the early days of setting up the Association for Business Women; opportunities for education that provided access to essential knowledge and skills, including gender-related research; the influence of role models at different times of her life, especially other women leaders; and the influence and support of wider networks and collective processes, including the Association and women's networks in other countries.

Paucity also proved motivating, she says. "One of the key factors that supported me to become a leader is the lack of opportunities, which forces you to find the right ways to reach your aim." That lack of opportunities is "aggravated by stereotypes that women cannot be a leader," she adds. Such stereotypes reinforce internal barriers. It's often the "the psychological fear, the thoughts of self-



doubt among women – ‘can I do this, will I fail?’ – that holds women back. Every woman should overcome fears and self-doubts and not be afraid when they start realizing their ideas. I advise women to take initiative and be active, not to fear to realize their own ideas and to be ready to experiment.”

Sarsembayeva adds that “it is often said that gender is not relevant when it comes to leadership, but the individual’s way of leading is. This is true, all leaders have their own style of leading, which derives from their personality, values and beliefs. A woman can lead in a masculine way and a man in a feminine way. But this raises the question of what kind of leadership is then considered to be good leadership. People have their own perceptions of what is good leadership and appreciate different characteristics over others.”

### **Political will central to promoting women’s leadership**

Looking ahead to the factors that will help to create opportunities for more women to emerge as leaders in Kazakhstan, Sarsembayeva first of all highlights political will. “Assessing the current situation as a whole, we can say that the process of active political advancement of women will largely depend on state policy and corresponding programme, on the development of the women’s movement and the gender positions of various organizations in the country and also on their mutual understanding and interaction.”

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Companies can adopt equality plans and aim for diversity by hiring competent women and men equally.

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Sarsembayeva observes that there are many ways to promote women’s leadership in this context. “Some of these are more time consuming and complex and others are more easily conducted.” If societal factors are considered, she says, “attention should be paid to the raising of children by giving boys and girls more possibilities to get to know different fields and professions in order to balance the gender division. Also, changing traditional gender roles by emphasizing equality in all matters would change attitudes towards female leadership and women’s own doubts about their abilities.”

At an organizational level, companies can adopt equality plans and aim for diversity by hiring competent women and men equally. Networking, sponsoring and mentoring are all good ways to promote female leadership as well, notes Sarsembayeva.



**Shriya Darmani**  
India

Co-founder, CEO and Director of SkyQuest Technology Consulting Pvt. Ltd, a global technology aggregator and accelerator working in the areas of agri-technology, nano technology, clean technology and life sciences since 2006.

SkyQuest named as a most innovative company by Fast Company international awards, in 2017, for giving inventors a marketplace.

Co-founder of WaterQuest HydroResources Management, which works globally and specializes in prospecting subterranean rivers and naturally desalinated water sources below the Earth's surface.

Founder of SDGs for the Z Generation.

Course editor for technology management module for an Agriculture Technology Management course run by the National Academy of Agriculture Research and Management and Hyderabad Central University.

Recipient of the Young Ficci Ladies Organization's Sambhavana Award for Most Innovative leader.

Chairperson of the Young Ficci Ladies Organization in Ahmedabad State.

Member of the Innovation Task Force, an ESCAP Sustainable Business Network.

Holds a Master of Science in Biotechnology from Pondicherry University in India.



**“At the heart of effective leadership is understanding yourself through self-knowledge and understanding your changing environment.”**

**Building skills, opportunities, links and influence globally**

Hundreds of innovative young entrepreneurs worldwide in fields, ranging from health care to clean water, are better equipped to contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as a result of the support of SkyQuest and related initiatives pioneered by Shriya Damani and her colleagues.

SkyQuest is a global market intelligence, innovation management and commercialization organization. Its focus is to connect innovative initiatives to new markets, networks and collaborators for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in areas ranging from agriculture, nano and clean technology to life sciences and information and communication technology.

The organization works globally with diverse stakeholders, including innovators, inventors, entrepreneurs, start-up businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises, Fortune 500 companies, R&D organizations, science and technology agencies, NGOs, development agencies and governments. It helps emerging businesses leverage external sources of R&D, capitalize on market opportunities and optimize the economic potential of their intellectual assets.

“Our youth need to be trained for twenty-first century skills,” says Damani. In addition to business initiatives, SkyQuest programmes also improve employability by providing individual skills assessments and reports, matching young innovators with employers, providing skills training and facilitating links with mentors and networking opportunities.

The core of the SkyQuest approach is the linking of innovative technological start-ups to the Sustainable Development Goals. Central to this focus is SkyQuest’s Sustainable Development Goals Accelerator, an initiative that identifies and supports high-impact innovations and start-ups that can radically transform businesses and industries in ways that align with the Goals. Through such means as the establishment of co-working spaces, early market testing groups, special funds and platforms, the Accelerator brings together a global community of actors, ranging from successful start-ups to Fortune 500 companies, to build momentum and collaboration on the work being done to achieve the Goals.

A particular priority for SkyQuest in this context is ensuring that the voices and perspectives of young people, especially young women, are heard within the innovative technology and business communities.

## **Economic and financial independence as a driver in the leadership journey**

Born into a business family and community in Rajasthan, India, Damani grew up in a progressive Indian familial environment that accepted and emphasized the importance of financial independence for both women and men. From an early age, Damani wanted to be an entrepreneur. “My vision and passion to create an entity where people could experience a purpose or something bigger than themselves was supported by my family through the freedom and encouragement that they provided,” she explains. “This gave me the self-belief that I needed as a 23-year-old girl to pitch my business idea when I was starting out.”

With her partner, Damani co-founded SkyQuest to support small and medium-sized enterprises at the cusp of technical innovation. “Our aim was to support their development, the commercialization of their products and services, their capacity to export and their networking with others.”

In a short time, SkyQuest was winning national and international innovative business awards and partnering with global entities, such as the United Nations Development Programme’s global South-South technology exchange programme and with multinational corporations. Damani became a role model for other young women wanting to start a business and engage in the world of innovative technology. Increasingly, she is in demand worldwide as a speaker to share the experiences, insights and achievements of SkyQuest.

Damani attributes her leadership development and success to her passion and vision, along with her family’s support, which included making it possible for her to stay engaged with the development of the business while jointly raising a young family. “It can take a lot of internal strength to keep both wheels rolling, at home and work: “being financially independent, finding work that is meaningful and exciting, the ability to get a foot in the door – all this while being present for your child, which is also a critical life skill,” she says. “Having a child is the single-most gender-defining thing a woman can do, and it should be valued by society at large as an important aspect of life, along with the career,” she adds.



Globalisation

Debt

Digitalisation

Emergence of National Happiness metrics

Rise of N

Growth

Micro-power gener

Domestic ene

Industries Consolidating Globally

Malicious intent detectors

Growth of security algorithms

Networked Risk

Telemedicine

a weapon

Mercantilism

Re-regulation

Robotic Surgery

Depress

Healthcare Rationing

Bio-simulations

80% of the global electricity needs still met by oil/coal/gas

Consumer e Health

Solar energy generati

Intelli

As the business and associated initiatives grew in size and influence in India and globally, Damani's leadership style evolved. Reflecting on her leadership experience, she observes that she was perhaps more directional in the early stages of putting the business vision into practice. Now she is more strategic and focused on creating space for the development of others, including through the coaching of emerging leaders and managers. "I have learned from my own experience rather than from any formal leadership training," she says. "At the heart of effective leadership is understanding yourself through self-knowledge and understanding your changing environment."

Damani experienced many challenges as she developed her leadership role as a young woman. "Most people are not used to dealing with women who are confident, strong and at the forefront," she observes. "Changing the ways in which children and youth are raised without the gender stereotypes is very important to address such challenges in the long term, so that they grow up accepting an individual identity and not confuse it with their gender."

She likes to imagine a world truly equitable. "At home and school, both genders should be raised to pursue financial independence. Imagine what a different world there would be if girls were trained and supported to be financially independent and were equipped with the communications tools and skills they need to speak their minds, understand themselves and develop as individuals."

### **Opening up new spaces for entrepreneurs and voices**

Damani highlights several actions that can be taken by governments and other actors to create opportunities for more women to emerge as leaders and innovators in business and technology. Citing a recent Indian study showing that the main factor causing girls to drop out of school is a lack of toilets, she says that action as basic as ensuring the provision of safe and hygienic toilet facilities

in schools will expand the pool of girls who may one day become leaders in their society.

Infrastructure development is another critical area for government attention in areas ranging from business incubators and IT facilities to safe streets and public transportation systems. "It is vital that young women are safe in their communities so that families are not fearful of them going outside the home for work and travel," she stresses.

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It is vital that young women are safe in their communities so that families are not fearful of them going outside the home for work or travel.

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Although there has been a dramatic increase in the number of young women studying at the tertiary level in recent years, women are still concentrated in certain stereotypical occupations and are often absent at the leadership levels in government and in business. "More is needed to remove gender bias from educational curricula and the occupational choices that are promoted at all levels," she says.

Creating opportunities for emerging women entrepreneurs to have opportunities to network with other women entrepreneurs and have access to women mentors is another priority that governments, as well as business and NGOs, can take up, she points out. "Many male mentors are available for young men in the business world, but we need more opportunities for women to be available as mentors, with their own style and experience that young women can relate to."

**Somsook Boonyabancha**  
Thailand

Chairperson and former Secretary-General of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, which promotes urban community-driven upgrading and development that is bringing about changes to more than 200 cities in 15 countries in Asia and the Pacific.

Former Director of the Community Organizations Development Institute, which pioneered a national community upgrading Baan Mankong Collective Housing Program. The initiative has been internationally recognized for transforming how the issue of urban development is addressed, shifting away from an ad hoc welfare approach to a more structural issue.

Former Secretary-General of the Human Settlement Foundation, Thailand.

Chair of the Sub-Commission on Security Housing and former adviser of the Crown Property Bureau.

Holds a Bachelor of Architecture from Faculty of Architecture at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand and a Master of Housing and Urbanization from the School of Architecture of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Denmark.



**“We need to create new political spaces and empower women with the finances and knowledge that can allow them to take more ownership over the processes that influence their lives.”**

**A generation of change**

The impact of Somsook Boonyabancha’s leadership on community-based approaches to urban development can be seen in almost 300 urban and rural communities across Thailand as well as in the recognition she continues to receive internationally. Boonyabancha was part

of a generation exposed to a changing political consciousness in the 1970s, at a time when students were questioning their role in society and discussing ways to promote development in Thailand. This dialogue and energy overflowed into classes, where the focus of Boonyabanacha's architectural studies looked at architecture not only as a technical but also as a socio-political process, centred on living spaces and individual lives. The focus became on what architecture meant to society and how it could bring about change to the development of different geographic locations.

The roots of Boonyabanacha's passion and commitment to community development are grounded in an appreciation for the social richness and wealth of knowledge of individual people, particularly those living in low-income communities.

### **Transforming approaches to urban development**

Inspired by her background of architecture, Boonyabanacha saw beyond conventional approaches to form and structure and looked at how planning with people can engage with the environment and transform physical spaces. Her studies at Chulalongkorn University awakened this understanding with hands-on experiences of planning and designing living spaces. Through this, she came to understand how architecture can reimagine and design change for a community.

Following her graduation, it was a natural choice for Boonyabanacha to work at the Slum-Upgrading Office of the National Housing Authority, hoping to realize more change for urban poor communities who have always been left out in urban development. She gained skills in supporting communities confronted with eviction through new land-sharing planning with those communities and negotiating between the informal and formal strata of society. Prevailing attitudes of slum-dwellers considered them to be illegal, and solutions centred around eviction. Boonyabanacha took the innovative approach of working with the communities to co-design and rebuild their physical infrastructure and housing. Witnessing a shift in attitudes, she was inspired by how planning can help slum-dwellers be accepted as part of community urban development, which in turn injected life back into

the community. She discovered that while she could bring the technical architectural skills, the real inspiration for design came from the people and their needs.

With the Center for Housing and Human Settlements Studies of the National Housing Authority during 1980s, Boonyabanacha began to study patterns of informal settlements in Bangkok to determine which communities were at risk of eviction and pre-empt this by negotiating a land-sharing agreement. This eviction mapping of informal settlements became a valuable strategy, enabling Boonyabanacha's organization to identify the risks involved and ways to make the settlement infrastructure and land tenure more secure for all. Later, she was involved in setting up the new Land Tenure Security Programme under the National Housing Authority, targeting those slums under threat of eviction. The new task involved intensive negotiation work between landlords and communities and several government organizations. Boonyabanacha's final successful housing project at the National Housing Authority was the Sengki land-sharing project in which she was the project leader. The project received the Habitat Scroll of Honour award in 1989.

Dissatisfied with the slow pace of change in government, Boonyabanacha resigned from the National Housing Authority in the 1989 to work with grass-roots people on social design. During this time, she was exposed to different work environments, including the United Nations, regional and national NGOs and the Crown Property Bureau. She advised the latter on how to use their property development for the people.

It was during her support to the Crown Property Bureau that Boonyabanacha became involved in the development of the Urban Poor Development Fund, led by Paiboon Watthanasiritham, to finance strategies for urban poverty alleviation. Through this valuable experience, Boonyabanacha learned how to make finance work for people and how effective community savings schemes could be used for the empowering low-income urban populations. Boonyabanacha went on to serve as the first Director of the Community Organization Development Institute in 2000, leading it to bring change through the Baan Mankong project to almost 300 urban and rural communities across Thailand.



## **Promoting change across national boundaries**

During the 1980s, Boonyabantha's activism also extended to the international stage when she was invited to join the Habitat International Coalition as an Executive Board member for Asia. She co-founded the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights as a regional network of organizations to support issues of the urban poor and strengthen regional collaboration. The Coalition also addressed serious eviction cases in the region. One prominent case was the eviction of communities living in areas designated for the 1988 Summer Olympics in the Republic of Korea. As Secretary of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights at the time, she was instrumental in organizing an international fact-finding mission and campaign that mobilized the Coalition to raise the visibility of the issue. As a result, the Korean Government announced its first public housing project to re-house the affected populations.

While campaigning for change through the Coalition, Boonyabantha believed in the importance of both supporting communities as actors and working with governments, not as adversaries but as partners. The focus of the Coalition's advocacy and work were thus not only to achieve visibility and raise awareness of low-income urban populations but to work in partnership with governments to find solutions that came from the communities and the residents.

Through the Training and Advisory Fund sponsored by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development in the 1990s, the Coalition promoted cross-country learning and provided an opportunity for individuals to move beyond their siloes and national context. Recognizing that often organizations working on urban development were limited by existing attitudes, beliefs or legal restrictions, these regional trainings helped countries to learn from each other about different approaches and flexible community-driven solutions that could more effectively support low-income urban populations. One learning that had a lasting impact on Boonyabantha arose from her participation in a community women's savings workshop in India. She discovered that community savings and building collective finances and resources can be a force for change for women.

## **Creating spaces for women's engagement in development**

An important outcome of the Baan Mankong initiative was the emergence of women's leadership within community development. A major entry point for this was the introduction of community savings schemes. Due to women's role in the household and community, as well as their negotiation skills, they could effectively undertake important tasks, such as collecting information on and identifying community and housing needs. With training on financial management, they soon developed the skills to manage the savings programme for the community.

The programme unlocked the space and power of women to take ownership of decisions on community development as a collective. Men eventually accepted the role of women in this. Boonyabantha says that women in leadership changed the locus of decision-making from a vertical top-down approach to a more horizontal and community-based level, which in turn shifted the gender dynamic within these communities.

Although women have been able to engage in urban and rural development at the community level, Boonyabantha notes the difficulty of securing such space in more formal political processes. For example, once active female community leaders enter into local politics, they are obliged to follow party policy or district council instructions, which limits their scope for action or decisions on local development and budget allocation.

## **Opening up political spaces for negotiation**

Born into a family of 12 children, Boonyabantha was immersed into a life of negotiation and collaboration. Educated among social classes above her own middle-income roots, she has been passionate about working for people of lower strata and building a better society for all.

Recognizing that housing is a political issue, Boonyabantha demonstrates the importance of creating space and leverage to negotiate agreements and influence directions towards more inclusive and collective change. She highlights that change comes not so much from



technical expertise but a political approach that can understand and navigate development processes to empower people. She is also mindful of the need to guard against one's ego and to be grounded among the people she represents.

Understanding the impact that peer learning could have on leaders, Boonyabancha initiated learning among ministers and senior government officers as well as community representatives to share the good practices of the Community Organization Development Institute and help to sway mindsets to open up the policy-space for more community-oriented development. Several exchange visits of ministers and community people were organized in the region. In one important example during the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum, in Bangkok, the Coalition and the Community Organization Development Institute organized an event for ministers, hosted by the Prime Minister of Thailand in Government House, which helped to add credibility their initiatives.

To achieve change, Boonyabancha stresses it has been important to understand the delicate power relations at play and the scope for change, "we need to create new political spaces and empower women with the finances and knowledge that can allow them to take more ownership over the processes that influence their lives."

Boonyabancha's keen interest in supporting changes by people themselves has shaped her political instincts, enabling her to understand power and political dynamics quickly and to understand the nature of people, their relationship to things around them and the scope for change.

### **The seeds of her leadership**

The seeds for Boonyabancha's leadership approach and influence can be traced back to the early stages of her life. Her lower-middle income background and primary education in a local government school helped Boonyabancha build her understanding of the realities and life of low-income communities. Thankful to her parents who encouraged education for all her 12 siblings, Boonyabancha took a keen interest in academia from a young age, sneaking glimpses at newspaper clippings while tending to their shop. Her good grades earned her admission into a

good secondary school, which she recalls was a formative experience that exposed her to different socioeconomic classes, learning opportunities and activities and a sense of collective action with her fellow classmates.

Boonyabancha also highlights the role of teachers who helped guide and support her at different stages of her career. She takes inspiration from Jockin Arputham, President of Slum Dwellers International, who taught her how to foster people-centred approaches to development. Throughout the years, Father Jorge Anjorena guided Boonyabancha to focus on positive and rights-based solutions. Paiboon Wattanasiritham influenced her on how to make finance work for community development. And she learned from other formal and informal community leaders in Thailand and Asia with whom she worked. Another initiative that inspired her is the Mahila Milan Women Together credit scheme to assist women pavement dwellers in Bombay.

### **Mutual support among women essential to strengthen future influence**

Reflecting on priorities for future action, Boonyabancha emphasizes the essential role of women for ensuring a more human-centred approach to development, linked to their roles in the family, household and community. She says that more spaces should be created to allow women to associate with other women and be active within community development and management. They can help bring different perspectives from the lives of people in communities into meetings and into the different horizontal structure to manage change and development, as opposed to the vertical hierarchies that predominate in the region.

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The role of women for...a more human-centred approach to development [is] linked to their roles in the family, household and community.

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## Tri Rismaharini Indonesia

Elected first female mayor of Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city. Re-elected in 2015.

Former head of Surabaya Program Controlling Division and Surabaya Landscape and Cleanliness Department.

In 2015, named among the world's 50 greatest leaders by US business magazine *Fortune*.

Nominated for the 2014 World Mayor Prize.

Recipient of Women Leader Award by Globe Asia in 2012.

One of 10 Inspiring Women Award 2013 recipients from *Forbes Indonesia*.

Recipient of the 2013 Kalpataru Award, a national award for preserving the environment.

Holds a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture and a Master of Arts in Urban Development Management from Sepuluh Nopember Institute of Technology in Surabaya and a doctoral degree from the Institut Teknologi Sepuluh.

Tri Rismaharini has also received a number of awards on behalf of the city during her term, including:

UN-Habitat Scroll of Honour for contribution to the development and improvement of urban living and ensuring no one is left behind, in 2018.

International Socrates Award for Innovative City of the Future from the Europe Business Assembly, in 2014.

ASEAN Environmentally Sustainable City Award, in 2012.

Asian Nations Townscape Award for Taman Bungkul Park, presented by the UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and other partners, in 2013.

Various national awards, including Future City of the Year in 2013; government and public service, in 2013; traffic regulation, in 2013; cleanest city, 2010–2013; gender equality, women's empowerment and children protection, in 2012; and governance, living and environment, in 2011.



**“Politics should be about providing welfare and the tools for fair treatment in society.”**

### **Greening, connecting and involving**

On the wall of Tri Rismaharini's office in the City Hall, a giant screen continuously shows traffic flows, waterways and water pumping stations across Surabaya. It is Indonesia's second-largest city, with an estimated 3 million inhabitants. The screen is linked to a newly established monitoring and response centre staffed by city police and traffic, fire, medical, water management and disaster response personnel. Rismaharini, is well known in the city for intervening directly in resolving issues that show up on that screen, even while travelling abroad. Her hands-on approach extends to picking up rubbish in the street in the

early hours of the morning, personally stepping in to direct traffic and engaging with citizens in the parks and other urban spaces she has created.

Reflecting on her approach to leading the city, Rismaharini describes herself as a “mother” caring for her citizens and encouraging them to actively participate in the development of their city. Themes in her role as mayor include “greening, connecting and involving”. Building on the “early wins” of her mayoralty since being elected in 2010, Rismaharini’s long-term view is towards an integrated human development approach to achieve an inclusive, equitable and sustainable city.

The achievements since 2010 are considerable, with a particular focus on improving the city environment, education, infrastructure development and services. Her priority in the first years as mayor was education: “Not just in schools, but mentally – to empower people. Students don’t just need to be smart, they need to be tough,” she says. In 2011, Rismaharini made education free up through the secondary school level. Education and vocational training now account for 30 per cent of the city budget, including some 500 scholarships in practical areas, such as aircraft maintenance. The impact of such initiatives has been profound. It used to cost 11 million rupiah (US\$777) for a child to attend the final three years of school, which was prohibitively expensive for many of the city’s poorer families.

Improving the health of citizens is also an important focus for Rismaharini, including free immunizations; child support and mental health services; providing opportunities for exercise through the newly established city parks and more than 360 sports fields; and involving citizens in their communities to strengthen social connections. Involving young people in community and physical activity is seen as an important contribution towards protecting them from being pulled into the world of drugs.

### **Developing a more sustainable city**

The “greening” of Surabaya under Rismaharini’s leadership has been recognized nationally and internationally. As well as improving the surroundings within which citizens live, work

and play, such initiatives also help to mitigate Surabaya’s sweltering temperatures. “A cooler environment helps to create cooler emotions,” says Rismaharini. In her own community, temperatures have dropped some 2–3 degrees as a result of the extensive planting of trees as part of the citywide “One Soul, One Tree” campaign. A compelling component of the greening process has been the mobilization of thousands of people, including school children, to plant and care for the expanding green spaces.

Her green agenda has largely centred on the creation of an extensive network of public parks in which people of all ages and backgrounds can meet and mix. The parks have free Wi-Fi and include libraries and fitness and other sports facilities. They also provide a lively urban space in which Rismaharini meets with citizens directly to discuss concerns and priorities.

The preservation of mangrove forests along the beaches has been another part of her agenda, with the city administration supporting communities to produce mangrove-based products, such as mangrove batik and syrup. The city authorities have also started an urban farming programme by providing advice, seed stock and farming tools. Waste management initiatives contribute to a greener environment and they have begun to reduce the huge urban waste issues throttling the city, starting from the household level, with the training of citizens to take responsibility for managing their garbage. The volume of garbage going to disposal centres has already started to drop.

### **Economic heroes and young warriors help transform city**

A growing focus for Rismaharini as part of her longer-term human development vision is stimulating bottom-up economic development through the creation of thousands of “economic heroes” and “young warriors” – small business start-ups and entrepreneurs, including from poor communities.

Some 7,000 small and medium-sized enterprises have emerged in the city under Rismaharini’s leadership through such initiatives as public co-working facilities that provide free space to link

emerging entrepreneurs with each other and with technical advisers. Through workshops and mentoring, young entrepreneurs are trained in skills, including IT and marketing, that are geared towards the needs of the city. The mayor joins monthly exhibitions of products that are generated by the emerging small businesses, providing motivation, feedback and advice on improving products and services.

Such developments reflect the changing economy of the city, which has shifted from a heavy industry and manufacturing base to services, trade and light manufacturing. In 2014, the services sector (consisting of trade, hotels and restaurants) contributed 44.3 per cent of city GDP, with the manufacturing sector the second largest contributor, at 19.9 per cent.<sup>20</sup>

Strengthening the city's transportation and water management infrastructure has been another focus of Rismaharini's mayoralty, improving both the lives of citizens and enhancing the attractiveness of the city for investment. Some 256 km of new roads better connect the city centre with the wider metropolis and neighbouring urban centres, and the city is moving towards the establishment of two additional modes of public transport: tram and monorail. Traffic flows, especially at peak times, have been improved by the introduction of an automated intelligent traffic management system.

Regular flooding is a longstanding major issue in Surabaya, some parts of which are below sea level and face the additional challenge of rising sea levels as a result of climate change. New pumping stations and monitoring systems provide additional capacity for managing water levels, while the expanding network of parks and mangrove regeneration have also helped to reduce the risk and impact of flooding.

Finally, city management and administrative systems have been a target for transformation under Rismaharini's leadership. Significant steps have been made to streamline and integrate city services through "one-stop shop approaches, establishing e-government systems and simplifying procedures for issuing of permits and licences. Additionally, there has been a consistent and

very visible campaign to root out corrupt practices across all city operations. Signs and posters reinforce this message throughout the city's administrative offices. "Politics should be about providing welfare and the tools for fair treatment in society," Rismaharini says. Foreign investors have come to value the honesty and professionalism of her administration, with the city attracting a number of well-known foreign companies from Asia, Europe and the United States.

### **A vision for a city and herself**

Underpinning Rismaharini's leadership journey has been a confidence and belief in her own ability and vision for the city's ability. The roots for this lie in her family background. "My parents are my heroes, especially my mother. They have shaped and taught me to become hard-working, persistent, caring and open-minded, with a strong spirit to learn and stay committed," she says.

Her years of tertiary education in architecture and urban development provided another important impetus, as did the years as head of city planning. Many of the visionary initiatives promoted by Rismaharini as mayor began in her former city planning role.

### **Navigating and negotiating different interests**

Surabaya's name is derived from a portmanteau of "shark" and "crocodile" in Javanese. At times, this dual image describes the challenges of navigating the politics and divergent interests of such a large and rapidly developing city.

Rismaharini's commitment, persistence, courage and vision have been critical to making progress in the face of such challenges, whether they are related to limited resources for city development, improving services or addressing corruption. Instrumental strategies in addressing resource and capacity constraints have been to maximize the potential of the city's own human resources; build shared commitment and confidence with the many stakeholders involved; and partner with private sector interests to support urban programmes.

<sup>20</sup> Investment and Service Coordination Board of Surabaya, *Surabaya: The Golden Destination for Investment Book* (Surabaya, Government of Indonesia, 2015).



## Quality and effectiveness of leadership

Looking ahead to the role of governments, national and local, in helping to create opportunities for women to become leaders in their own society at all levels, Rismaharini notes that a 30 per cent gender quota is in place for women's representation in the national parliament.<sup>21</sup> However, she considers that the real challenge is not so much the numbers, but is the quality and effectiveness of representation. In particular, Rismaharini highlights the importance of providing informal opportunities at the family and community level for women to develop the essential skills, knowledge and confidence that are important to later leadership roles.

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The role of governments, national and local,...[is to help] create opportunities for women to become leaders in their own society at all levels.

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An important dimension of Rismaharini's promotion of community involvement and connectivity is the number of young women now emerging as informal leaders at the community level. "They are a majority of the leaders in communities across the city, often because their husbands are working," says Rismaharini. She advises these emerging leaders that "everybody can be a leader" and that they should never see themselves as being inferior. "If you want to be a leader," Rismaharini advises, "you need to work hard and earn your role – you cannot expect any privileges in how you are treated." Also important for emerging young women leaders is the development of an economic base through employment, including as entrepreneurs. But fundamental to leadership roles for women, says Rismaharini, is "keeping a balance across all their important responsibilities in life – as contributors to their own community, as employees and entrepreneurs and as mothers within their own families."

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21 A 30 per cent gender quota introduced for Indonesia's national parliament in 2003. As of 1 January 2017, women made up 19.8 per cent of elected representatives at this level, which ranks Indonesia at ninety-ninth place worldwide: UN Women and Inter-Parliamentary Union (February 2017).

## Zolzaya Batkhuyag Mongolia

- Co-founder and Director of Women for Change.
- Founder of Professional Women's Leadership Programme.
- Founder of Global Youth Anti-Corruption Network.
- Former programme officer with Zorig Foundation.
- Former General Manager at Open Academy Law and Policy Institute.
- Former information manager, MONFEMNET/National Network of Mongolian Women's NGOs.
- Former public relations and communications manager with Hands Up for Your Rights youth campaign for human rights.
- Fellow at Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era.
- Asia Foundation Development Fellow in 2015.
- Fellow at Siegel Institute, Kennesaw State University in Georgia, USA.
- Fellow at Community Solutions and IREX Programme.



**“We need women leaders with quality and impact, not just the numbers in seats.”**

### **Putting gender on the agenda<sup>22</sup>**

Important progress has resulted in putting “gender on the agenda” in Mongolia, and Zolzaya Batkhuyag has been a major contributor through Women for Change,<sup>23</sup> which she set up in 2010 with three young lawyer friends. Seven years after those small beginnings, Women for Change has become a diverse and influential group of 90 people, supported by four full-time staff and a team of researchers. All the members are active in working groups supporting the three main programme areas:

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- <sup>22</sup> The following also reflects discussion with Dorjkhand Ganbaatar, resource team member with Women for Change.
  - <sup>23</sup> The organization, co-founded by Zolzaya Batkhuyag, was originally called Young Women for Change.

public advocacy and awareness raising on gender-based discrimination, with a particular focus on eliminating all forms of gender-based violence;

youth development, particularly to support opportunities for a youth voice within Mongolia's political and decision-making processes;

women's leadership, including supporting women running for public office and a now well-established and highly in demand leadership development programme for young professional women.

A major aspect of the transformative nature and impact of Women in Change is the way they work. In contrast to the top-down and hierarchical nature of many organizations in Mongolia, we are "a fully open and participatory organization and decide on issues and priorities together," says Batkhuyag, as she prefers to be called. "We have built a values-based organization that doesn't depend on money to continue its work. The main resource we have is ourselves, our members."

"In Mongolia, there is not enough space for young women to practise leadership. For example, student unions and youth associations are mostly dominated and led by men. So, we created the platform to allow women to come together to express themselves and support each other in whichever areas they are active and interested," Batkhuyag elaborates. "It is a space where young women especially can learn and practise leadership. Constant reflection and evaluation is an important part of our culture."

"We work collectively to create innovative activities to promote our campaigns, starting with our first major public outreach activity, which was performances of the Vagina Monologues in Mongolian language in March 2011," says Batkhuyag. These performances ran for more than three years and were aimed at bringing hidden issues to the surface and making people think about gender perspectives. Another example of Women for Change's approach was their campaign on body positivity. "This was about being confident in who we are and standing up to all the pressure to conform to commercial images of how women should look," she explains. Along with a team of young creative artists, with support from international partners, Women for Change has organized major art exhibitions, street art,

My Short Skirt protests and other activities to challenge prevailing stereotypes of how women should look.

Sexual harassment in the streets and on university campuses is another hidden issue that Women for Change has brought into the public arena following a survey among 600 young women that revealed this to be a major commonly shared issue. One project has been the creation of a draft policy on sexual harassment for adoption by the country's universities, drawing on the experience of 20 universities worldwide.

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Everyday proverbs that condone violence against women are now no longer acceptable.

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The adoption of a Domestic Violence Law has been another focus of the Women for Change efforts. "We are always looking for creative ways to reach out to different parts of the population," says Batkhuyag. As part of their campaign to support the draft law, the organization constructed a small movable house in which people could sit with headphones to experience a domestic violence scene, followed by group discussion. Participants were encouraged to write to legislators to press for adoption of the law. Some 600 letters were sent, with some being used in the parliamentary debate that led to adoption of the law in December 2016. Women for Change has also been following up with training for law enforcement officers. After two decades of campaigning by civil society groups, public attitudes on domestic violence are changing, says Batkhuyag. Everyday proverbs that condone violence against women are now no longer acceptable, for example.

### **We need women leaders with quality and impact**

Women for Change's flagship activity is the Professional Women's Leadership Programme. It aims at professional women and regularly





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attracts hundreds of applications for the few places available. “We need women leaders with quality and impact, not just the numbers in seats,” says Batkhuyag. “Our approach includes understanding the realities of our society, developing public engagement and speaking skills and asking the questions: How can I contribute to change, what skills do I need and how can we work together?”

In this context, Batkhuyag highlights the importance of intergenerational learning and expanding the space and opportunities for people to work together and learn from each other. “Female leaders with more experience can help to make the leadership pathways of younger women easier,” she says. “The real need is for mutual support across the generations as a reciprocal process. We have a lot to learn from each other.”

Batkhuyag observes that a growing number of Mongolian women are emerging in leadership roles who are well educated and have strong skills. “But the challenge of transforming social and cultural norms of patriarchal society is beyond the resources of individual women. Only when we are working together in the same directions can we make a real difference. We are working to help transform energies into synergies for change.” The organization’s Voices for Change campaign aims to encourage and support people, wherever they are in society, to be advocates of gender justice, human rights and opportunities for all.

Working with men is also a focus of Women for Change, including through Men for Change workshops that encourage young men to reflect on masculinity in Mongolian society and see gender equality not as a women’s issue but as something that benefits everybody. Batkhuyag notes that the “real man” image that is still prevalent is a harmful stereotype that makes changing behaviours more difficult. Because people think that “boys will be boys and will survive anyway” and that girls are more vulnerable, parents often believe that it’s better to send their daughters away to be educated, she says. The young men who are left behind are often without jobs and prone to alcohol abuse. “We need to be addressing such developments in a balanced way that benefits everybody,” says Batkhuyag.

## **Dramatic events provide turning point in leadership journey**

Batkhuyag trained as a lawyer and was involved in human rights and other clubs at university. The turning point in her leadership journey came on 1 July 2008 when a riot exploded outside the office of the ruling political party, right next to the hotel where Batkhuyag was working as a marketing manager. “At the time, I was active as a volunteer in a human rights group,” she recalls. “I saw the aggression of young men in the street. Some 800 were arrested, and five were killed. I joined the human rights monitoring efforts and was part of discussions afterwards on what we could do to help find ways for people to be able to express their political ideas and values peacefully and in a non-violent way.”

Batkhuyag co-initiated a Hands Up for Rights human rights campaign and became active in civil society activities. After two years, she and three friends came to see that women needed their own space to share their views and experiences and created a Facebook meeting event. Through the emerging discussions, common challenges became apparent, mainly related to the patriarchal environment in Mongolia. Batkhuyag started Young Women for Change in 2010 with the three friends and began with performances of the Vagina Monologues as a way to bring difficult issues into the open. “Many people said that Mongolians weren’t ready for this, but the audiences continued for more than three years, 50/50 women and men. I learned not to underestimate people and that if issues are explained in the right way, people will understand them and respond.”

## **Motivations and challenges in leadership journey**

The mutual support relationships with other women and seeing progress as a result of their collective efforts are major sources of energy and motivation for Batkhuyag. Her family and partners are also important sources. Women for Change is now attracting resources from international sources, such as the United Nations Population Fund and the governments of the United States, Germany, Lithuania and Canada.

Many challenges remain, mainly related to the impact of prevailing gender norms on attitudes and behaviour. “In particular, we tend to find that it’s men in their 50s with access to power and money who resist what we stand for, particularly through social media. Young men generally tend to be supportive,” says Batkhuyag. The double standards of public discourse and media coverage pose another challenge for Batkhuyag and her colleagues. During a recent high-profile rape case, the expectation was that women parliament members would deal with it. “The issue was not seen as a public one that should concern everyone,” comments Batkhuyag.

While important to the work of Women for Change for the resources and connections they bring, international partners also bring certain challenges. “Their often one-off and short-term funding approaches can make continuity difficult,” notes Batkhuyag. She adds that this can reinforce the perception that civil society activity is all voluntary and doesn’t require professional staff and financial stability to be effective.

## **2020 elections dangling an opportunity**

Mongolia’s next elections in 2020 are seen by Batkhuyag as a potential turning point for the vision and efforts of Women for Change and other women’s organizations and networks. “It will be a critical time in the development of our society, 30 years after Mongolia became a democracy, in 1990. At the same time, we have the mining boom in our country, with all the challenges and opportunities that brings.” Corruption is a big issue in this context, she says. It can be expensive to stand for parliament because political parties demand payment before they will support candidates. Women are particularly disadvantaged by this practice.

“It is time for us to reflect as a country on the progress and quality of our democracy,” concludes Batkhuyag. “Our sense is that people are looking for new directions and new leadership. 2020 will be an important opportunity to ensure that more women are elected to parliament – not just as numbers but as values-based and ethical leaders who want to make a difference and open opportunities for others.”

## Case Study

**“I realize now that I can make a difference.  
I can help make change.”**

**Leadership programme for female participants in joint worker and management committees<sup>24</sup> in garment export factories, Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

**Implementing agency:** Better Factories Cambodia programme, International Labour Organization, in collaboration with UN Women, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

### Case study background

The training is a core component of the Better Factories Cambodia’s strategy for engagement in the country’s garment and footwear export sectors. It complements training provided for mainly women garment sector workers, including on supervisory skills and sexual harassment. The training methodology has been adapted in shortened form from the UN Women Cambodia Youth Leadership Academy programme. The UN Women academy has an underpinning focus on the development of transformative women’s leadership to challenge the negative impacts of prevailing gender norms and contribute to the building of the women’s movement in Cambodia through critical analysis of the complexity of power structures and dynamics.

Fifteen young women leaders from diverse government and civil society backgrounds form the core group within the academy. The academy programme spans four in-depth transformative leadership training workshops over a period of up to 12 months. As well as providing a basis for

mutual support and learning, the core group also drives the development of the programme.

The two local trainers for the garment industry initiative initially received intensive training for their role through the academy’s week-long training of trainers course. Both are members of the academy’s core group.

### Gender dynamics of Cambodia’s garment industry

The garment industry is the country’s largest source of formal employment and export earner, with a workforce of approximately 650,000 persons in 2018, 85 per cent of whom were women. Most of them had migrated from rural villages, where poverty levels are high, literacy levels are typically low and employment prospects are limited.

Occupational segregation within the sector is highly gendered, with most women in “cut, sew and trim” roles on production lines; few of them are in supervisory positions. Despite improvements in recent years, women in the sector continue to endure long working hours, limited opportunities for skills development, variable enforcement of pregnancy rights and entitlements, sexual harassment, lack of functioning nursing rooms and day-care options for mothers of young children, occupational safety and health issues, poor living conditions (and related poor nutrition), the threat of losing their job if they become active in a union and, often, dangerous transportation to and from work (with high levels of injury and death). Mass fainting of female workers in garment factories is a recurring issue, which is generally linked to working conditions in the sector, although this has not yet been definitively proven.

<sup>24</sup> Known as Performance Improvement Consultative Committees, they were established formally under the Better Factories Cambodia programme in the garment export sector.

As part of international and local efforts to address these issues and promote the application of international labour standards and the national labour laws, the ILO long-established Better Factories Cambodia programme provides monitoring, advisory and training services across the garment export sector. All export factories are required to participate in the monitoring and transparency programme as a condition of their export license. The Better Factories Cambodia' annual report in 2018 presented compliance data for assessments conducted in 464 factories in Cambodia between 1 May 2017 and 30 June 2018. More than 160 garment export factories also received Better Factories Cambodia advisory and training services to improve compliance with international labour standards and the national labour laws.

An important component of the Better Factories Cambodia programme is the establishment of bipartite (employer and worker) committees in an increasing number of garment export factories (more than 160). These provide a platform for increased cooperation in identifying and addressing problems in the workplace. The committees (known as Performance Improvement Consultative Committees, or PICCs) are mostly gender-balanced. However, experience indicates that in practice the impact of gender norms, power dynamics and other factors inhibit the voice and participation of female participants.

### The training approach

The Better Factories Cambodia Female Leadership Programme was established to strengthen women's leadership, voice and representation within the PICCs. Still in its infancy of development and implementation, it brings women together from different factories into a safe and trust-based environment around the following objectives:

1. Strengthen the skills of women PICC members to represent women workers in their factories and to analyse, communicate and act on the issues affecting those workers.
2. Contribute to the individual and collective empowerment of women workers.

The course aims to facilitate the development of leadership skills and attributes in the following areas:

- Collecting information and capturing and recognizing patterns in the factory.
- Participation in the analysis of issues to find solutions. This requires understanding gender and other social structures (and power relations within them) as well as problem analysis tools.
- Representational skills: listening to women, being accountable to them and relaying their issues to others.
- Participation in discussions and decision-making (meetings), presenting their views effectively, being able to negotiate and cope with not being successful.
- Understanding and applying enabling strategies: building mutual support and coalitions; negotiating family and community support for dealing with obstacles; and developing self-awareness and self-care.

As of September 2019, 26 factories and 104 participants have taken part in the training programme.

The training is structured around a series of two in-depth training workshops. The first is a two-day foundation workshop involving three to five women workers from about five factories coming together, about 25 participants in all. These workshops introduce gender analysis; explore power as it affects individual lives and as a resource that women can draw upon; and builds skills in problem analysis. By the end of the workshop, each factory group agrees on what steps they will take to apply their learning and address an issue in their workplace. Underpinning the workshop approach is a focus on developing individual self-awareness, strengthening confidence and skills and laying foundations for ongoing peer support and solidarity.

A follow-up one day workshop four to six weeks later provides an opportunity for sharing and reflection on the actions taken after the first training. It supports individual and collective problem-solving to strengthen future action. The

focus on confidence and skills-building as well as mutual support and learning is carried on from the first workshop. Skills in providing constructive feedback and listening as key elements of effective leadership are reinforced.

Core to the training is learning how to understand and analyse gender power dynamics in any situation, both in the workplace and in personal life. A variety of tools and approaches are used to raise awareness, link learning to everyday experience and guide the participants through the programme with the end goal in mind. “We don’t use PowerPoint and lectures,” the trainers explained. “The whole approach is very much based on the experience and everyday life of the participants, both at work and at home. It can often become very emotional as the participants come to understand some of the factors which influence their lives.”

An important part of the wider picture of the training is the Better Factories Cambodia’s wider team of advisers and trainers within the garment sector. They work with the PICCs and provide an important means of monitoring impact, progress and lessons from the training.

### Case study methodology

The case study methodology had the following main components:

- i. a review of available relevant documentation developed by ILO and UN Women;
- ii. a focus group with participants from two workplaces, coordinated (with interpretation provided) by Better Factories Cambodia;
- iii. interviews with the local facilitators and trainers; and
- iv. interviews with ILO-Better Factories Cambodia and UN Women staff supporting the initiative.

The focus group and most local interviews were conducted on 7 February 2019, in Phnom Penh.

The focus group used a story-telling approach to draw out participant reflections on (i) the workplace issues they were dealing with in their respective PICCs; (ii) changes to their lives and workplace roles as a result of their involvement in the training; (iii) what made the biggest difference for them in the training; and (iv) what they would propose to improve the training and to strengthen its impact in the future.

Six female workers took part in the focus group from two Phnom Penh-based garment factories

Interpretation for the group discussion was provided by Mouly Vichhra, Better Factories Cambodia trainer and adviser. Interviews were also conducted separately with Mouly Vichhra and with Sara Park, the Better Factories Cambodia Programme Manager; Sovanthyda Tan, Better Factories Cambodia trainer and adviser; and Khun Sophea, Programme Analyst, UN Women Cambodia Country Office.

### Participant feedback

#### Shared issues in the workplace

Although they came from two separate workplaces on opposite sides of Phnom Penh, the training participants quickly discovered that they shared a number of common issues in the workplace. Prominent among them were:

Safety and occupational health (OSH) protection: One participant served on her factory’s OSH committee, which worked closely with the PICC. Issues being addressed by both bodies in tandem were ensuring that emergency exits were not locked during working hours, escape routes were free of obstruction, fire extinguishers were functioning and safe drinking water was available to workers. The OSH committee members used their mobile phones to take photos and instigate action to address issues. Similar issues were reported from the second factory.

Resignation of skilled workers: Both factories had a high rate of continuous resignations, with lack of child care cited as a primary factor. Production pressures and other family reasons also influenced

workers' decisions to quit. Major shared concerns were the loss of seniority and benefits that resulted from forced decisions and a lack of management understanding the reasons for resignations and what could be done to address the concerns, especially when it is common for workers who have left to call one or two months later to seek their job back.

Local women and men workers not promoted as supervisors and managers, with preference given to foreign (mainly male) staff: The participants considered that the skills and experience of Cambodian workers were not recognized and valued.

Lack of prioritization by managers of issues raised by women workers: Participants from one factory reported that it is difficult to get resources from factory management to fix even simple problems. They highlighted the absence of locks on toilet doors as an example, with workers having to use chopsticks from their lunch to hold the door shut.

## Learnings and impact of the training

The following words of focus group participants describe the learning they had gained from the training to date and the impacts on their life at work and at home. Several themes stood out:

### A safe and trusting environment opens the way for collective learning and support.

"When I first opened the door to go into the training, I saw only women in the room. I thought, I can finally talk about issues as a woman in a safe place – about my husband, men in general, all the things I had been keeping inside myself for so many years."

### A sense of self-worth provides a foundation of effective leadership.

"Before the training, I saw myself as a girl with a low education and no value to others. After the training, I came to see myself as person with value. I realize now that I can make a difference. I can help make change. I can communicate. I can add value at work and at home. I have found

my confidence. I know who I am. I was lost for so many years. Thank you for giving me the chance to realize who I am and to become a better person and leader."

"I feel I am a better person now supporting workers to make the right decision for themselves and their families, that I have value and can give value."

"I now understand that knowing who you are and valuing yourself are important to being a good leader."

### Core skills, such as listening, power analysis, problem-solving, constructive feedback and communication can be learned and really make a difference.

"Learning about constructive feedback has changed my life. I used to be very aggressive if I felt that workers were not understanding me as a union leader. I used to always ask myself why I wasn't able to be more effective. I can now communicate in a constructive way with management and workers and at home, too. I am now more able to take issues to the PICC and can communicate better in discussions with workers about doing what is best for themselves and not being forced into decisions."

"I learned to be a better listener, to open my mind, to understand how to discuss issues openly, to be aware of body language and tone. This is a big change for me. I am a new supervisor now in the workers' eyes."

"I learned to listen and give constructive feedback. I also used to be aggressive, not listen and get into 'lose-lose' situations. I now understand that mutual respect and listening are important to being a good leader. "

"I used to take it easy as a supervisor and never made an effort to discuss issues with the workers. After the training, I began to ask myself why are workers leaving, what is wrong, is it my supervision that is the problem? What can I do to improve? I have now learned to listen, analyse and discuss. For example, in one case, a worker wanted to quit because of a toothache. At the training, I had learned how to communicate and discuss issues in a constructive way. So, we talked about what was behind the decision to leave. It turned out

that the real reason for quitting was to care for her children. We discussed what she could do. As a result, the worker decided to stay and keep her income and seniority.”

### Leadership and change don't stop at the factory door.

“My personal life is now quite different after the training. My husband never helped with any household chores. I did everything on my own, as well as working full time to earn money for my family. The training helped me to understand this as a gender issue – not as my born job in life. I as a result, I gained confidence to discuss these issues with my husband and eventually persuaded him to do the laundry at home. He came to see that I have a paid job, and we need to share the work at home. This helps me be active as a leader in my workplace.”

“I used to be the ‘bad child’ in my family and was very aggressive and loud with my mother. The training and learning about how gender issues affect our lives has helped me to understand and respect her as a strong woman, a strong working woman.”

### Leadership includes valuing others and appreciating diversity.

“As an HR supervisor, I used to evaluate workers but wasn't actually interested in their feedback on job satisfaction, issues in the factory and what the factory can do to make work a better place. For 37 years, I thought I was a superwoman, that what I said was always right and powerful, that the workers were not important. But now I understand they have a value that I don't have. I think of one worker with three children. She doesn't earn much but now she is able to save and buy the lipstick she always wanted. Like the other workers in the factory, she manages her life and her family on her small income. It is really them who are the superwomen. Before I used to say no, no, no. Now I say yes I can, yes I can, yes I can...I know that I can make a difference to improve lives. I now understand that workers' input is important.”

“The training helped me understand that workers have different histories and backgrounds and make different decisions in their lives. It is important to respect and value this.”

### A part of transformative leadership is opening opportunities for others.

“I have shared the training with the line supervisors I am responsible for and, through them, with the workers on the line. I want to share what I have learned with others who have never had the same opportunity. That way we can all benefit and be leaders together.”

### Factors for success

Participants and trainers alike highlighted several features of the training that have contributed to its success to date. The following stood out among them:

- The women-only environment, a new experience for some participants, creating a safe environment for open discussion and learning.
- The grounding of the whole approach in the everyday experience of the participants.
- The focus on building relationships and finding common ground among women from different workplaces and backgrounds.
- The focus on promoting self-awareness, a sense of self-worth and active listening as cornerstones of leadership, with the training providing a “mirror” for self-learning.
- The focus on understanding gender and power dynamics, which applies as deeply to personal life as it does to the workplace.
- The provision of analytical frames and tools that can be applied to any situation, for example, gender analysis and problem tree approaches.
- The collective mutual learning approach. The fact that the trainers were also openly learning from the experience and adapting their approaches reinforced the mutual learning environment.
- The focus on developing mutual support arrangements, within and across factories, including by setting up social media groups.



- The focus on applying the learning through practical step-by-step change in the workplace, based on collective action plans and follow-up feedback and analysis. The recognition that change is complex and part of the role of a leader is having a bigger picture and being able to individually and collectively analyse and respond to frustrations and setbacks.
- The dedicated training team, who combined their natural and existing skills with the specific training they received for this role.
- The partnership between the ILO and UN Women, bringing together their respective mandates, experience, skills and partnerships to ensure the best possible long-term outcomes for women participating in the programme.
- providing opportunities for the deepening of the knowledge and skills learned from the initial two training sessions;
- setting up a similar programme for male PICC members, highlighted by participant and trainers as well as by Better Factories Cambodia own internal experience. Sara Park, Programme Manager of Better Factories Cambodia commented that women participating in similar trade union-based initiatives in the country have also asked if their husbands could be included in some aspects of the training to raise their awareness and facilitate greater support at home for women emerging as leaders in the workplace.

### Areas for improvement

At the same time, participants and trainers noted some areas for improvement to support the ongoing growth and development of participants and ensure the sustained impact of the training. For example, the trainers noted that not all factory groups have been able to put their collective plan into action between the two workshops. Several factors were identified as making it difficult to follow through in some cases, including the influence of the very power dynamics that participants had been learning about, continued lack of confidence and the pressure of work on the line.

The need has been identified in this context for stronger attention to follow-up support – both during the gap period between the two training sessions and in a longer term. Such support might include individual and collective mentoring as well as facilitating networking through social media tools and expanded inter-factory communication and linkages.

Linked to this observation, the trainers also highlighted the need to maximize the monitoring and direct support that can be provided through the Better Factories Cambodia advisers and trainers who are working with the PICCs as well as more broadly with management and workers.

Other areas noted by participants and trainers for attention as the programme evolves:

### Looking ahead

This initiative links to the broader role of the ILO-Better Factories Cambodia in promoting industry-wide change, which puts international labour standards at the centre of business culture and planning.<sup>25</sup> “The next phase of our work in Cambodia will focus on developing a culture of compliance across the garment industry,” said Park. “This goes beyond just technical compliance and ticking boxes. It is about embedding these standards into the very thinking, planning and investment that drives the development of the industry in Cambodia.”

“The leadership, voice and representation of women at all levels of the industry – in senior management, within trade unions and on the factory floor – is critical to developing such a culture and strengthening Cambodia’s reputation as an ethical source of the garments that people purchase and wear worldwide,” Park added.

Park indicated that the Better Factories Cambodia’s aim is to involve women in the training programme in at least 60 factories by the end of 2020. Critical to this expansion will be the strengthening of ongoing support arrangements to sustain and strengthen the impact of the training in the long term. She emphasized that an important part of

<sup>25</sup> A national policy framework in this context is the Cambodian Garment and Footwear Sector Development Strategy 2019–2025, which Better Factories Cambodia helped to develop. Supporting implementation of this strategy is a priority in the next ILO five-year country strategy for Cambodia.

the monitoring and support arrangements will be the advisory and broader training services that Better Factories Cambodia already has in place in all the participating factories. “Along with our factory assessment and transparent reporting services, these also give us an in-built way of monitoring actual changes at the enterprise level,” Park explained.

Also vitally important, added Park, will be increasing the mentoring support available to participants in the programme and assisting the follow-up mutual support, communication and networking arrangements among the women, both within and between the factories participating in the programme. The partnership between ILO and UN Women will continue to provide a strong and effective foundation for the ongoing development of the programme, Park concluded.

