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Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director

An illustration of a woman in a white business suit standing on a ladder, painting a large lightbulb. The lightbulb is filled with various business icons like a bar chart, a pie chart, a cloud, and arrows, surrounded by colorful splatters of paint in shades of blue, yellow, and pink.

On Women And Leadership: Three Amazing Asian Stories

This article was co-written with Adeline Jayasuria.

Although their numbers have increased somewhat over the last 20 years, women continue to be under represented within top management ranks. The debate as to why more women don't make it to the top remains unresolved. One assumption is that a cocktail of initiatives designed to improve working conditions for women will eventually combat the problem. Will it really? Despite the many measures in

place like legislated quotas, flexible work hours, better childcare support, women advocacy groups and research, the dearth of women in senior leadership persists. Is the problem one of gender or is it something else? Are we treating the symptoms and not the real root cause of the problem? Let's consider the careers of three Asian women to find out.

Dr. Jemilah Mahmood

Malaysian

Gynaecologist, Humanitarian

She was at the peak of her career running a lucrative private medical practice with her husband, but was constantly frustrated and did not like what she saw. “I pursued medicine because I liked working with people and I really wanted to help people. I had always dreamed of working in the humanitarian field but I got into the paper chase and career treadmill instead.” Deep inside, her inner voice continued to nag her, “What am I doing, why am I not following my heart? I really want to be a doctor for everyone.”

The Defining Moment:

It was the Kosovo war at that time. While watching the news with her 5 year old son, she said to him, “Look at these children, look how they have no food and are so hungry. Now do you understand why you can’t waste food and why you have to study hard...” At this point, the little lad turned to look at her and said “Don’t just talk about it Mummy. You are a Doctor, go and do something.” Right there, through wisdom from a 5 year old, she knew it was time to act!

Pursuing Purpose:

In June 1999, she established MERCY Malaysia, also known as Malaysian Medical Relief Society. The first humanitarian organisation to provide a platform for Malaysians to take a role in the international humanitarian arena.

Her first big mission was to lead a team of MERCY workers when the tsunami hit Aceh, Indonesia in 2004. Food, medical care and rescue teams were sent to help the people there. As one of the main teams who quickly responded with assistance in the disaster, MERCY Malaysia helped the citizens in restoring what they had lost, by rebuilding homes and providing medical supplies to those in need.



Global solidarity is everyone’s responsibility. We all have to feel compassion.

- Jemilah

Later in the Afghanistan civil war, she negotiated resolutely with a reluctant Taliban tribal leader until he allowed her to provide medical care for the women of the tribe.

2003, Baghdad: On her way to offer medical relief and supplies to hospitals, she was shot in her left hip by Iraqis. They mistook MERCY’s ambulance team for Syrians, who the Iraqis thought had bombed their village. The Iraqi hospital staff and the driver accompanying them were killed in the tragic incident. Two other doctors suffered grievous injuries but Jemilah alone, survived. Doctors at the Chiwader hospital wanted to remove the bullet from her hip but she refused to do so as she did not want to take up their time and medication. Right after her wound was stitched up, she got back on her feet and helped a woman deliver a baby. The bullet remained in her hip for five days!

Her husband once asked her why she wanted to pursue international humanitarian efforts, to which she replied, “I want to do this because Malaysia cannot measure development by these tall buildings and highways alone. Global solidarity is everyone’s responsibility. I am a human first, then Malaysian. We all have to feel compassion. Did I become a doctor only to make money? I believe every human being has the right to clean water, health, and dignity. No matter if their belief systems and values are different to mine, it is a fundamental human right and therefore I will fight for people’s rights to get these things.”

Neetu Bhatia

Indian

MIT Engineer, Banker, Businesswoman

Her profile read like a dream: An engineer turned investment banker in New York. Working initially at Lehman Brothers on media and telecom advisory, capital raising and restructuring transactions, she ended up as Director of the Media, Communications & Technology Investment Banking Group at the Bank of Montreal. While most people would have given an arm and a leg to stay, she quit her Wall Street job and career to return to India to start out on her own.

The Defining Moment:

It all happened in the summer of 2006, when she and brother Akash were back in India visiting family and the family decided to go out and do something fun. Short of opening the morning newspapers, there were zero options to figure out what was playing at the cinemas and what was out there in terms of leisure event options. As they say, necessity is the mother of invention. It was at that very moment that a spark triggered in her brother's head. "We realised that there was a gaping hole in the system that was not being filled, and we saw that as an opportunity to do our bit to change a part of the world that we grew up in!"

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- Neetu

Pursuing Purpose:

April 2007, Kyazoonga – soon to be India's first and largest entertainment and sports ticketing company – was born. It was aimed to offer consumers easy access to all forms of ticketed entertainment and sports with online, mobile and retail distribution channels.

Under Neetu's leadership, Kyazoonga emerged as a company of many firsts. The scope of the company included the fulfilment of personal dreams. In November 2007 the India-Pakistan cricket series was on and for the first time for a match in India, Kyazoonga professionally sold tickets online. It's no secret how big a deal cricket is for Indians especially when the arch rival nations are up against each other. A chaatwala (hawker of Indian street snack food) from the city of Agra hears on radio that tickets to the match were available on the Kyazoonga

KYAZOONGA.com
Ticket to life



website, and immediately gets to a cybercafé to purchase a ticket for himself. Not owning a credit card of his own, he requests the owner of the café to help make the purchase by using his credit card, offering to reimburse the café owner in cash.

The café owner obliges, and the chaatwala happily gets to Jaipur on an overnight bus from Agra. At the stadium counter, he produces a voucher eagerly waiting to have it exchanged for his ticket. A Kyazoonga rep asks for his credit card in order to validate the purchase, but of course he doesn't have one. Getting extremely nervous thinking that he was not going end up with a ticket, he explains the background of the transaction.

He manages to contact the café owner and the rep verifies that the transaction was indeed valid, finally handing over the chaatwala his prized ticket. What happens next is totally unexpected. He is so thrilled that he literally falls to his knees to touch the feet (a mark of respect in India) of the Kyazoonga rep that was servicing him saying, "I never dreamt that I would ever be able to watch an India-Pakistan game live. You have made that dream come true for an ordinary man like me. Thank you, Thank you!"

That was the first of many anecdotes the Kyazoonga team have come to witness. With such affirmations, Neetu just knew that the organisation was fundamentally altering people's lives for the better and that was a matter of immense pride. "It's the very reason that gets me up every morning with a will to be the best every single minute, every single day, in every single transaction – making lives better for all our stakeholders be it consumers, clients, customers and our employees."

The company has since moved from strength to strength having sold millions of tickets to consumers in India and other countries. From being the first and largest sports and entertaining ticketing company in the Indian subcontinent to a rapidly growing international player in multiple geographies, Kyazoonga has just opened their Silicon Valley office, and charges on with its core mission each day: Tickets made simple for everyone, everywhere.

www.iclif.org

Sri Mulyani Indrawati

Indonesian

CEO and Managing Director - World Bank

She is No. 2 at the World Bank, 2nd only to President Jim Yong Kim. As Chief Operating Officer and Managing Director, Sri Mulyani is the highest ranking women at an institution with 15,000 plus employees operating in 140 countries around the world. She oversees global operations with responsibilities ranging from financial management to poverty reduction. She joined the World Bank in 2010, bringing with her not only financial expertise but also government experience as the former Finance Minister of Indonesia.

Sri Mulyani was selected as Indonesian Finance Minister in 2005 by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. One of her first acts was to fire corrupt tax and custom officers in the department. She guided the economic policy of one of Southeast Asia's largest economy, successfully turning around Indonesia's corrupt tax administration, leading to a large boost in much needed tax revenues, and then navigating the economy through the economic crisis of 2008. As a result, she built a reputation of integrity and earned the respect of her peers. "I was appointed as the first women Finance Minister relatively young, in my early 40s. Of course my top management team, they were all male and older compared to me. They tested me."



Pursuing Purpose:

When asked to describe her career trajectory, she calmly describes it as a 'consistent path.' Sri Mulyani explains that the situation was such because she was always driven by an unswerving theme in all her career choices. What was that theme? "The underlying theme was being very clear in knowing how I could test the knowledge that I have to reality." What reality? To her, reality was understanding how she could eliminate poverty. It influenced the core of how she worked, how she would ensure policies and economic growth models were designed to be inclusive enough to benefit all sections of society. She was also strongly influenced by her mother who defied stereotypes in a rather conservative society. "Juggling between marriage, family life and career is not really a

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trade-off. You can manage all, so I cannot say I had to choose one of them. My mother got her PhD while raising ten (10) children, that's really amazing. She is my strongest mentor", says the mother of three herself, with a PhD in economics and international recognition for her integrity and ability.

- ▶ What do these remarkable stories tell us about our original issue of the lack of gender diversity at the top? If they (and many other illustrious women around the world) could do it, why not others?
- ▶ Are these three working in environments that are more conducive to women? Are the challenges they face any less significant than those of others? Are they fortunate to have male mentors or supporters who help them succeed despite the odds?
- ▶ The answer to each of these questions is a big NO. The challenges women face around the world are not trivial by any means.

The women featured in this article are succeeding in spite of the environment, not because of it.

They are succeeding because they dug deep into their own values and found a huge mismatch between the environment and what they believed to be important. They next conceived a better future, and decided to make it their purpose to create it. Once they started, they never gave up despite significant resistance and difficulty, because they managed to uncover their leadership energy – the power of purpose stemming from a set of deeply held values. It is this (leadership) energy that prevents them from giving up, and that is why they are succeeding. In short, they are real leaders, and both men and women that aspire to succeed have much to learn from them!

Their Advice to Women:

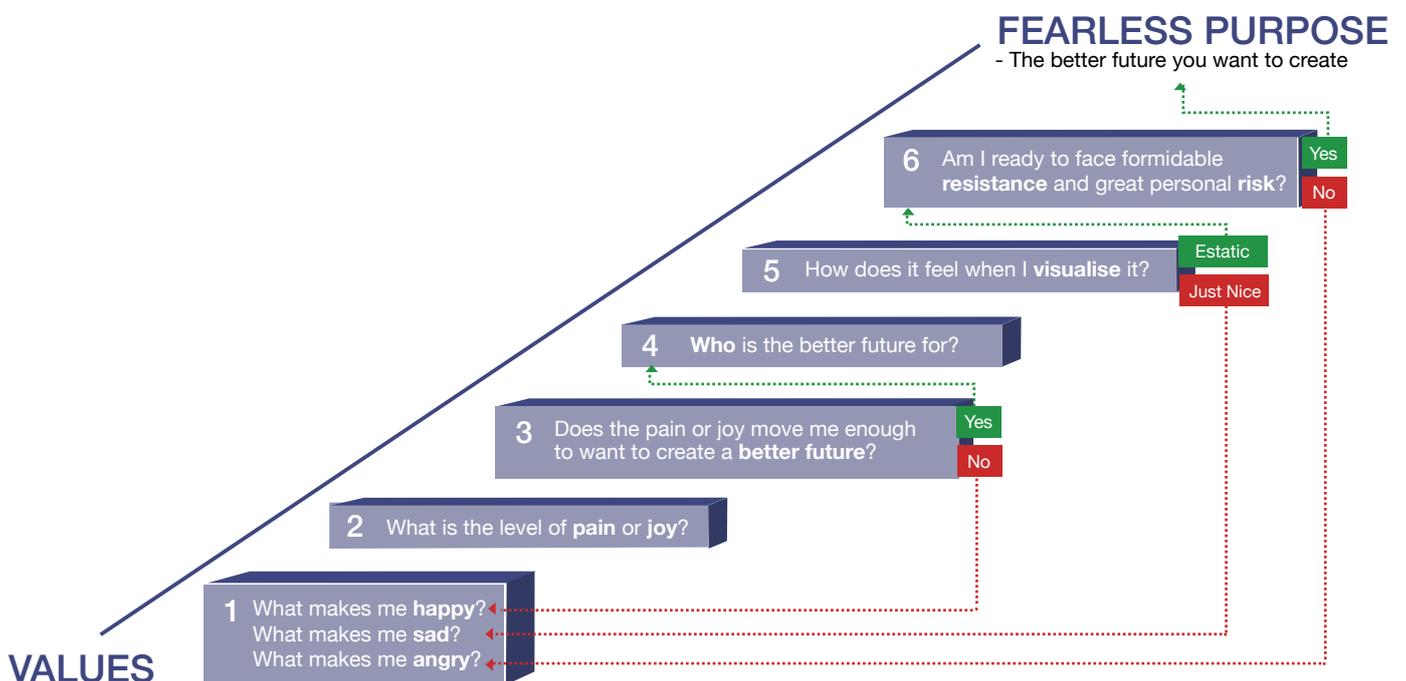
“Never project yourself to be different because you are a woman. Focus always on what it is that you are doing and if you are better than the next guy – then you just are. If other people have biases, it’s best to ignore those biases and focus on what it is you are doing in order to be the best.” - **Neetu**

“Don’t be afraid to make a change. In life you have to take some risks, calculated risks. If you don’t take all the shots you definitely miss the opportunity.”
- **Jemilah**

“To every girl, every women I say-push the boundaries, every inch of it matters. At the end, it’s about being professional and really good at what you are doing. That will show your true qualities rather than your gender.”
- **Sri Mulyani**

So what is one good way to increase gender diversity within the top ranks of the business world? Encouraging women to engage in deep, honest reflection to help uncover their personal leadership energy. If you are a woman that aspires to succeed to the top against all odds, try the self-reflection journey below, and don’t stop until you find answers that are true and authentic for you.

Discovering Leadership Energy by Living Life Awake



Once you are clear about the better future you want to create, reverse engineer it, one step at a time. If your answers are truly honest, and as long as you don’t give up, you cannot fail. Male or female, the secret force behind all great leaders’ success is the continuous pursuit of this inner journey.



Global perspectives

Asian insights

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