

SHE- IMPACTS



Increment-US

GROW WITH US

She Leads, She Inspires, She Impacts

FOREWORD

Over the years, I have had the privilege of witnessing the transformative power of women who lead—not just in boardrooms, but in every space where decisions shape the future. Their journeys have been more than inspiring; they have profoundly shaped my own understanding of leadership, purpose, and perseverance.

This publication is deeply personal to me. It is more than a tribute to women leaders across industries—it's a reflection of the invaluable lessons I've gained through their experiences. As a leadership coach, I've had the honor of working with incredible women who navigate challenges, break barriers, and create impact with both strength and grace.

Their resilience in adversity, their unwavering commitment to their vision, and their ability to lead with empathy have only reinforced what I've always believed—true leadership isn't just about success; it's about making a lasting difference. We are proud to introduce inspiring women leaders from diverse sectors who are breaking barriers, driving change, and shaping the future with their vision, resilience, and leadership.



*This publication would not have been possible without the remarkable women whose stories are featured here. Their willingness to share their journeys, their struggles, and their triumphs is an act of generosity that I deeply appreciate. **To every contributor, I extend my heartfelt gratitude. Your voices, your leadership, and your courage will undoubtedly inspire many others to step forward with confidence and determination.***

*On this Women's Day, as we celebrate these extraordinary leaders, let this collection serve as both a source of inspiration and a call to action. **May it encourage aspiring leaders to embrace their potential, and may it remind organizations of their responsibility to build cultures that nurture and empower women in leadership.***

To every reader, I invite you to reflect, engage, and champion the cause of inclusive leadership. The future is shaped by those who dare to lead—and today, more than ever, we need diverse voices shaping our world.

Dr. Shruti Jain
Founder, Increment-US & Editor

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We are proud to share the journeys of inspiring women leaders from diverse sectors— who have overcome challenges, embraced growth, and are shaping the future with their vision and resilience.



Vaishali Babu
Managing Director & CEO,
BSE Clearing House - ICCL



Dr. Megha Bhargava, IRS
Additional Commissioner, Income Tax
Department, Ministry of Finance,
Govt of India



Pooja Aggarwal
Managing Director, Schindler Lifts NZ Ltd



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Increment-US

GROW WITH US

Vaishshali Babu

Managing Director & CEO,
BSE Clearing House - ICCL
Masters in finance,
Programs from IIM A, IIM B & IIM C

'I am always on the move'

A portrait of Vaishshali Babu, a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing glasses on her head, a red bindi on her forehead, and a blue and red saree with gold jewelry. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a light-colored, textured wall.

Financial independence is the key to true empowerment. Without it, opportunities remain limited. Women must take charge of their careers, seek leadership roles, and contribute meaningfully to the economy. Organizations, too, must commit to fostering diverse and inclusive leadership.

Leadership is not about fitting into a mold—it's about breaking barriers, staying resilient, and continuously striving for excellence. Let's build a future where women not only participate but lead with confidence and competence.

-Vaishshali Babu

VAISSHALI BABU

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

I entered the industry by accident. I come from a humble background—growing up in a 180-square-foot home in Mumbai with my family of five. I studied in a Marathi-medium municipal school, and for a long time, I struggled with self-doubt and a lack of confidence, especially because I saw English as a major barrier to achieving a high-profile career. **My father had a traditional vision for my future—he wanted me to learn stenography, get a job, and eventually settle down in marriage.** Initially, this limited my aspirations, but I was academically strong, particularly in mathematics, which gave me confidence over time.

I had dreams of pursuing a career in Chartered Accountancy, but financial constraints and lack of family support made it seem out of reach. Despite this, I pushed myself. I fought to enroll in an M.Com program and started appearing for various competitive exams. I kept clearing them—insurance, NABARD, Railways, UTI—which reinforced my belief in my abilities. Eventually, I joined Bombay Port Trust as a computer executive, where I worked extensively on typing tenders. Looking back, **my journey has been truly transformational starting with self-doubt but evolving into resilience and determination.**

A pivotal moment in my career was *when I met my husband while working in an insurance company. I often say that he is more ambitious for me than I am for myself.* He has been a great motivator, a source of influence, and a role model in my professional growth

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

I have been always highly self-motivated. There have been circumstances wherein I am the only woman in industry meeting or board rooms which has been challenging. It has taken time and effort for me to make my fellow men colleagues and seniors acknowledge my efforts. Today, I hold a position that directly contributes to nation-building, operating within an ecosystem that demands high alertness and agility. As a regulator, there is no margin for error—100% accuracy, self-discipline, and organizational efficiency are paramount



My upbringing instilled in me a strong sense of ethics and righteousness, which have become an integral part of my DNA. Despite growing up in a challenging environment, I remained committed to doing what was right.

For instance, when I lived in a chawl with my parents, my surroundings were not always conducive to education. Many of my neighbors came from backgrounds where studies were not a priority, and there were instances of unethical activities around. However, I never let my environment define me. *I stayed focused on my education and upheld my values, no matter the circumstances.*

This ethical foundation, built at an early stage of my life, continues to guide me in my professional journey. Even in complex or high-pressure situations, **I firmly believe in doing what is right, maintaining integrity, and upholding the highest standards in my work.**

VAISSHALI BABU

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

Women in the financial sector often have to *put in extra effort to prove themselves*. It can be discouraging at times, but *overcoming these challenges requires courage—the courage to speak up, take action, and even put a stop to certain biases when needed*.

For example, when I have a different perspective, I make a conscious effort to rationalize my point of view to ensure I am heard. *In the past, I had to take additional steps compared to my male peers to establish credibility. However, these experiences have made me more resilient, and I strongly believe that persistence and confidence are key to breaking these barriers.*

Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them?

Overall, people have been supportive throughout my leadership journey, and I have not personally faced conscious bias. However, I have observed biases affecting my friends and peers. Women are often overlooked for leadership roles due to assumptions about family responsibilities.

In my case, my family's support has been well known to my organizations, and it has been a key pillar in my growth journey. There was a time when I was considered for an international position, and unlike the usual hesitation companies might have for a woman leader, my organization had no such concerns because they were aware of the strong ecosystem I had built around my work and personal life.

I have been fortunate to work with organizations like BNP Paribas, where DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) is not just a corporate slogan but a well-implemented practice. My leadership growth has been shaped by such environments.

What key trends are shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

The Indian capital market is advancing rapidly, often surpassing developed nations in efficiency. With fast settlement cycles and technology-driven transformations like dematerialization and real-time transactions, our ecosystem is evolving.

Continuous learning, upskilling, and adaptability are essential for staying ahead in this dynamic industry. Women leaders should embrace change, develop technical proficiency, and actively engage in decision-making to drive innovation.

What skills are essential for future women leaders in your sector?

- Agility & Adaptability – The industry evolves rapidly, and staying relevant is key.
- Ethical Leadership – Upholding integrity in financial decision-making is crucial.
- Strategic Thinking – Understanding macroeconomic trends and regulatory frameworks.
- Effective Communication – Clearly articulating perspectives in high-stakes environments.

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life?

Balancing career and family is a global challenge for women. The prime years of our careers—typically from 20 to 40—are also the prime years for building a family. Women often find themselves navigating both fronts simultaneously, which can be demanding.

I have personally experienced this journey. I have a son who is now 28 years old, and there were times when I had to make compromises as a mother. I deliberately slowed down my professional growth until he was 11, but I always gave 100% to whatever role I was in.

VAISSHALI BABU

One piece of advice I always share with women is to move at their own pace. Your only competition is yourself. Do not compare your journey with others—focus on your own progress. Leadership and professional growth are long-term journeys, and they unfold differently for everyone.

Most importantly, ***don't look back and ruminate over past decisions. The choices you made at a particular time were the best choices given the circumstances. Instead of second-guessing yourself, move forward with confidence and embrace your journey.***

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

In any high-stress or high-pressure situation, I always go back to the basics—the foundation of value-driven decision-making that my parents instilled in me. For me, the key to resilience lies in truth, ethics, and simplicity. When people talk about "grey areas," I always say, remove the black threads, and there will be no grey area. Keeping things simple and ethical allows me to navigate challenges with clarity and confidence.

My mantra for handling stress is—***'Be Simple, Be Different'***—stay true to your values, and stand out by doing things differently.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

My biggest advice to young women is simple: stay in the game. Don't step away too soon. Remain relevant, keep exploring, and look for opportunities to grow. Think of it like standing under a waterfall—you will get wet, but how you utilize the water is up to you. Leadership is about competence, resilience, and accountability—so embrace challenges, take ownership, and carve your own path with confidence.

How Can Organizations Foster More Inclusive Environments That Empower Women to Lead?

Inclusion should not be just a policy—it must be a deeply ingrained culture reflected in everyday decisions. Small but meaningful actions can drive significant change. For instance, hiring and promotion criteria should be strictly based on competence. Questions like *"Are you married?" "Do you plan to have children?"* or *"Who will take care of your kids?"* have no place in the evaluation process. A candidate's personal life should never determine professional opportunities—true meritocracy must be the foundation of all hiring and career advancement decisions.

To cultivate real inclusivity, leaders—both men and women—must actively champion and support women in their families, workplaces, and professional networks. Networking and stakeholder engagement are especially critical for women's career growth, providing them with the visibility and resources needed to succeed.

On a larger scale, failing to harness women's potential means underutilizing a vital national resource. In urban and metropolitan economies, women's leadership is essential for driving growth and innovation. Imagine the profound impact on India's GDP and overall development if more women were empowered to lead and contribute meaningfully.

Creating an inclusive environment also requires a shift in mindset. Women must challenge outdated norms, reject biases, and take bold steps toward leadership. Additionally, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives can play a transformative role in advancing gender equality through investments in education, leadership development, and financial literacy programs for women.

Most importantly, the journey toward gender equality starts at home. I strongly believe that we must raise boys to respect and support women as equals. True inclusivity begins with upbringing—when we instill these values in our families, we lay the foundation for a more equitable society.

Dr. Megha Bhargava, IRS

Additional Commissioner,
Income Tax Department,
Ministry of Finance, Govt of India
BDS, Mphil Public Policy,
University of Cambridge

'A seeker of meaning and purpose, navigating the intersections of civil service and social impact'



DR. MEGHA BHARGAVA, IRS

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

While practicing dentistry, I often found myself treating patients whose health issues were not just medical but deeply intertwined with larger systemic challenges—malnutrition, lack of hygiene awareness, inadequate healthcare access, and financial constraints. Each case reinforced a troubling realization: I could treat one patient at a time, but the root causes of these issues ran far deeper, embedded in the very structure of our healthcare and social systems.

It was then that I understood the need for fundamental, systemic change. I realized that to make a real difference, I had to move beyond the confines of a clinic and work at a level where policies were made, and large-scale interventions could be implemented.

This realization led me to civil services, where I saw an opportunity to bring about change at a more fundamental level and transform countless lives.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

My inspiration to join the civil services was rooted in a deep desire to create meaningful change at a systemic level. *I wanted to be in a position where I could influence policy, bridge implementation gaps, and work on solutions that impact entire communities rather than just individuals. The civil services offered that platform—an opportunity to work at the intersection of governance, policy, and public welfare.* Moreover, coming from a background where I witnessed social and economic inequalities firsthand, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to contribute to nation-building. The ability to drive change, ensure transparency, and work towards a more equitable society is what led me to transition from medicine to the civil services.

What keeps me motivated is the impact of my work as an IRS officer—whether it's uncovering complex financial fraud, strengthening international tax cooperation, or implementing policies that ease compliance for honest taxpayers. *Every decision, every action has the potential to shape economic governance, ensuring that resources are directed toward national development.* The ability to drive systemic change, enforce financial discipline, and contribute to a stronger, more equitable India is what fuels my commitment to leadership in public service.



DR. MEGHA BHARGAVA, IRS

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

One of the biggest challenges I have faced as a woman leader is balancing the high-stakes responsibilities of being a civil servant with the equally demanding role of being a mother. Civil services is not just a job; it is a commitment—one that requires long hours, crisis management, and decision-making that impacts thousands, sometimes millions, of lives. At the same time, motherhood is an all-consuming journey, demanding presence, patience, and emotional resilience. The pressure to perform at work while being fully present for my child often felt like an impossible balancing act. I overcame this challenge by redefining balance—not as a perfect 50-50 split, but as *an ongoing adjustment based on priorities. I learned to set boundaries, delegate effectively, and lean on my support system—both at home and in the workplace. More importantly, I accepted that I did not have to choose between being a dedicated professional and a devoted mother; I could be both, even if imperfectly.*

Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them?

I have been fortunate not to have encountered biases in my career. In fact, I strongly believe that women have been able to excel in leadership positions due to the active support system of men around them—be it mentors, colleagues, or family members who have encouraged and uplifted them. Leadership is not about gender; it is about competence, vision, and resilience. Throughout my journey in the civil services, I have witnessed men and women working together as allies, breaking stereotypes, and fostering inclusive workplaces. This has reinforced my belief that when talent and dedication are recognized above all else, progress becomes a shared goal rather than an individual struggle. While challenges do exist, I have found that a collaborative environment, merit-driven recognition, and strong mentorship pave the way for women to thrive in leadership roles. It is this collective effort that continues to empower women to take on high-stakes responsibilities and lead with confidence.

What are the key trends shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

The rise of digital governance allows women to take the lead in *leveraging AI, big data, and e-governance for efficient, transparent, and citizen-friendly administration*. With citizen-centric policies becoming the focus, women can bring a unique perspective to governance, ensuring inclusivity in areas like public health, education, and gender-sensitive policymaking.

Women in civil services are not just participating in governance; they are actively shaping it. Their ability to bring empathy, resilience, and strategic thinking to leadership roles makes them invaluable in policy formulation and execution. By mentoring future leaders, advocating for greater representation, and fostering ethical governance, women can drive systemic change and create a more inclusive and progressive future for public administration.

What skills do you believe are essential for future women leaders in your sector?

Women leaders in civil services need a combination of strategic thinking, adaptability, and strong interpersonal skills to navigate the complexities of governance. Decision-making and crisis management are crucial, as leadership in public administration often involves high-stakes situations requiring firm, well-informed choices. Resilience and adaptability are equally important, as women leaders must balance professional responsibilities with societal expectations while navigating policy shifts and administrative challenges.

DR. MEGHA BHARGAVA, IRS

Strong negotiation and communication skills enable effective policy formulation, stakeholder engagement, and conflict resolution, while technological and data literacy is becoming essential with the increasing role of AI, big data, and digital governance. Future leaders must also bring empathy and inclusive leadership to the forefront, advocating for marginalized communities and ensuring governance is people-centric.

Lastly, mentorship and team-building play a significant role in encouraging more women to join and thrive in civil services, fostering a culture of collaboration and support. By cultivating these skills, women can not only break barriers but also redefine governance, making it more inclusive, responsive, and future-ready.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

To young women aspiring to leadership roles, my advice is simple: **believe in yourself, embrace challenges, and lead with purpose.**

Leadership is not about gender; it is about competence and vision. Trust your abilities and never hesitate to take on challenging roles. Knowledge is a powerful tool, so continuously invest in learning, stay updated with evolving trends, and build expertise in your field.

Resilience and adaptability are key—there will be setbacks and criticism, but true leaders learn from failures, adapt quickly, and keep moving forward.

Leadership is not just about authority but about integrity and empathy—decisions made with honesty and a commitment to serve will always leave a lasting impact.

Finally, **don't wait for the perfect moment to step up.** Create opportunities for yourself, take responsibility, and trust that you have what it takes to lead. Women bring unique strengths to leadership, and the world needs more of them at the forefront, driving change and shaping a better future

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

Organizations can create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead by fostering a culture of equal opportunities, mentorship, and supportive policies. First and foremost, ensuring merit-based growth and leadership roles without gender bias is crucial.

Mentorship and networking play a key role in empowering women. Establishing mentorship programs where senior women leaders guide young professionals can help build confidence and career growth. Additionally, having male allies who actively support and advocate for women in leadership can drive real change.

Workplaces must also implement family-friendly policies, such as flexible work hours, parental leave, and childcare support, allowing women to balance professional and personal responsibilities effectively. Creating a safe and inclusive work environment, with strict policies against discrimination and harassment, ensures that women feel secure and valued.

Moreover, investing in leadership training and skill development specifically designed for women can help bridge the confidence gap and prepare them for higher roles.

Pooja Aggarwal

Managing Director , Schindler Lifts NZ Ltd
MBA, PGDM , IIFT

One line that drives me:

*"Abhi to maine naapi hai mutthi bhar
jameen , abhi toh pura aasman abi baki hai"*



POOJA AGGARWAL

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

My leadership journey has been fulfilling and has been *shaped by my conscious decision to take on nonlinear assignments, which significantly enabled my strategic thinking and approach.*

I began my career in the financial industry with Aditya Birla Capital, joining their core sales team through campus placement. During this time, I developed strong customer-centric skills, deep understanding customer engagement, trust-building, and value-driven services. I also navigated through two major economic cycles and business crises, which reinforced my ability to adapt and lead through uncertainty.

A pivotal shift in my journey came when I took on a cross-functional role in Human Resource Management (HRM) for four years. This decision, though uncertain at the time, proved to be transformational. Working closely with Business Heads, I gained a broader perspective on business priorities, strategic problem-solving, and employee preferences. This experience strengthened my ability to align organizational goals with talent strategies, making me a well-rounded leader. Looking back, this move expanded my strategic thinking and leadership capabilities. It helped me recognize my untapped potential and develop a holistic approach to leadership. Varied experiences collectively shaped me into the leader I am today—someone who embraces challenges, thinks beyond functional boundaries, and leads with a strategic mindset.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry?

Growing up in a Marwari family in New Delhi with three sisters, I often questioned whether I had the confidence to step into a leadership role or take on a global career. However, my experiences over the years have shaped my perspective and strengthened my decision-making abilities.

One of the defining moments in my journey was launching a full product category with a go-to-market strategy within just 1.5 years at Aditya Birla Group. This experience sharpened my entrepreneurial mindset, strategic orientation, and ability to see the bigger picture. It also equipped me with key leadership skills such as effective communication, market planning, and strategic thinking—pushing me to move forward with confidence.

Joining Schindler further reinforced my leadership aspirations. The company fosters an entrepreneurial spirit and a culture of openness, continuous improvement, and customer-centricity, all of which align with my values and leadership style.

Additionally, I strongly believe that women bring unique strengths to leadership, particularly in customer-oriented roles. Skills like high emotional intelligence, empathy, multitasking, and relationship-building make women exceptional at understanding customer needs, engaging across touchpoints, and driving customer satisfaction.



POOJA AGGARWAL

At Schindler, I have seen firsthand how these qualities contribute to success, with many leaders recognizing the value of women in key positions. This journey—shaped by both challenges and opportunities—has fueled my passion for leadership and my commitment to driving impact in my industry.

What fuels your relentless drive for growth and impact, and who or what has been the most transformative influence in shaping your leadership philosophy?

What drives me is *passion & curiosity*—the constant desire to learn, grow, and make an impact. I strongly believe in the idea that the five books we read and the five people we surround ourselves shape our perspectives and define our ecosystem. I have been blessed to be surrounded with friends who want to make it the best in life.

A significant influence on my leadership journey has been my father. He embodies resilience and an unrelenting passion for doing more, constantly pushing boundaries. From him, I learned that we all have far more potential than we realize—the concept of the power of infinity. There are always more opportunities to explore, more challenges to overcome, and more ways to make a meaningful impact.

I also draw inspiration from Oprah Winfrey, her journey—from a humble background and overcoming immense challenges to becoming one of the most influential women in the world—reminds me that obstacles are just stepping-stones to success. Coming from a more privileged background, I see this as a reminder that I have the opportunity and responsibility to push myself further, take bigger leaps in my career, and create a meaningful impact.

This mindset of continuous learning, resilience, and striving for excellence keeps me motivated every day.

As a woman leader, what have been the most significant challenges you've faced, and how have you built the resilience and strategies to overcome them?

I believe that as women leaders, we must recognize two key challenges: *push factors (external barriers)* and *pull factors (internal barriers)*. While *external challenges—such as biases or workplace dynamics—will always exist, I have found that the bigger barriers often come from within.*

Many women hesitate to claim their achievements, experience imposter syndrome and wait for opportunities instead of actively seeking them. These internal hurdles can be more limiting than any external obstacle. ***Before addressing external barriers, we must first overcome our own self-doubt and reluctance.***

To navigate these challenges, I have consciously built a strong support network of mentors and peers who guide and inspire me. One of the most powerful tools I've created is my **"Coffee Book"**—a personal journal where I document pivotal projects, professional achievements, and even personal challenges, like my mother's surgery last year. I record moments of resilience, how I overcame setbacks, and lessons learned. This serves as a constant reminder of my strength and ability to handle adversity.

Whenever I face a new challenge, I revisit my Coffee Book, drawing motivation from my past experiences. It reinforces the belief that if I've conquered difficult situations before, I can do it again. This mindset has been instrumental in shaping my resilience and confidence as a leader.

POOJA AGGARWAL

Have you faced gender-based expectations or biases in your leadership journey? How have you navigated them while staying true to your leadership style?

I haven't encountered direct biases, but societal expectations for women in leadership are often different. For example, I have been referred to as a "Boss Lady" numerous times, and there is sometimes an unspoken assumption that I won't ask tough questions. However, *when I step into the boardroom, I think as a leader, period. I challenge the status quo, ask fundamental questions, and push for strategic decisions that benefit the organization.*

For me, the real challenge has been breaking these stereotypical expectations rather than overcoming outright bias. Leadership should not be defined by gender but by capability, vision, and impact. Fortunately, the workplace is evolving. More organizations are recognizing the value of women in leadership, and I've seen a growing demand for diverse perspectives—especially in customer-centric roles.

I'm proud to be part of this transformation, where *both men and women are learning to collaborate in an equitable way. The journey is ongoing, but the shift is happening, and I am committed to contributing to this change by leading with confidence, authenticity, and a results-driven mindset.*

How do you maintain a healthy balance between your professional responsibilities and personal well-being? What strategies have been most effective for you?

For me, a fulfilling life is like a *wheel of life* with multiple spokes—a successful career is just one part, but maintaining relationships, personal well-being, and mental peace are equally important. With the constant demands and disruptions in today's world, focusing solely on work can lead to burnout.

To maintain balance, I prioritize *nutrition, rest, and discipline*. One of my non-negotiable habits is exercising every evening—it keeps my body and mind strong. Living in New Zealand, I have the privilege of being surrounded by nature, and hiking has become one of my favourite ways to recharge. It brings me peace of mind and allows me to disconnect from stress.

Additionally, *I practice tech fasting—I dedicate at least one Saturday a month to being completely offline. No social media, no emails, no screens—just real connections and time for myself. This habit has been incredibly effective in keeping me grounded and present.*

In high-pressure situations, what are your key strategies for handling stress and maintaining resilience?

My zest for life and strong support system are what keep me resilient. Having people I can trust—mentors, friends, and colleagues—gives me a space to share my thoughts, seek advice, and maintain perspective during challenging times.

Beyond that, I rely on physical activity, such as exercising and hiking, to clear my mind. These activities not only help me manage stress but also reinforce a positive outlook. *By focusing on solutions rather than dwelling on pressure*, I'm able to navigate high-stress situations with clarity and confidence.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

Believe in yourself and embrace the unknown. *Confidence* is key to leadership, and a curious, adventurous mindset will help you grow beyond your current limits. Your journey might not look exactly as you envision today, but you have the potential to stretch beyond your comfort zone and achieve far more than you realize.

Additionally, *strategic networking* is essential. *Find the right mentors, build relationships, and actively seek opportunities. Today, there are numerous platforms available to help women connect with industry leaders and grow their influence—use them to your advantage. A strong network will create an ecosystem of support that smooths your path forward.*



Shaveta Sharma-Kukreja

CEO & MD, Central Square Foundation

BA (Hons) Economics, MBA

'An Indian women balancing my roles of being a wife, mother & daughter with my professional responsibilities of being CEO @ CSF contributing towards nation-building; my passion & common sense is my super-power!'

SHAVETA SHARMA-KUKREJA

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

I been fortunate to be part of two start-up experiences in my career. In my corporate career, I joined Global Vantage in 2002 when it was still being set up. At the start of my career in development sector, I have been a part of the founding team at *Central Square Foundation*. I gained immensely from the experience of wearing multiple hats during formative years of a new organisation- the entrepreneurial spirit and showing up for evolving needs of a start-up makes for great leadership lessons.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

I have been raised with the values of wanting to leave the world a better place, and hence I chose to work in the development sector. *Education is the bedrock of every nation & society, and the true equaliser to uplift not just an individual but the family beyond the lottery of birth. What motivates me is the belief in unlimited potential of all children and aspiration of every parent who dreams of a better future for their child.* India's demographic dividend towards the dream of a **Viksit Bharat** will be shaped by strong Education system for all our children, and I consider it a privilege to be able to contribute towards it.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

Biological clock and being (or expected to be) the primary care-giver are the biggest challenges for women professionals. I was fortunate to have the choice to take an extended maternity sabbatical when I had my children. Regarding being a care-giver, my approach has been to own that part of my personal responsibility very openly and not being apologetic about it. I work hard and show up prepared and when I am there I am all in! If there are times that I have to prioritise any personal responsibilities I believe I have earned the right & credibility to do that. It is also imperative to have a good support system in place (not just at home but also a team to be able to lean on at work), and the acceptance that there will also be times that work will need to be prioritised. *It is a balancing act, and over time you get better at it!*



Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them?

Fortunately, I have not encountered any explicit biases. But just being the minority gender in nearly every room, and even more painfully around any decision-making table, hits hard. I was raised to have a voice; ***I work hard work to ensure I have an informed voice, and I am confident in 'taking the space' in an unapologetic way. I am never seeking any special treatment for being the woman in the room/ on the table, but I won't let myself get defined/ pigeon-holed based on my gender.***

SHAVETA SHARMA-KUKREJA

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

High-pressure and associated stress have become power for the course in our lives. What causes stress is not the situation but our response to it. *My personal mantra is that being on top of my work, i.e., reliable level of preparedness is the basic antidote to stress.* Discussing the situation with impacted stakeholders rather than hypothetically letting it grow in my own mind always helps. *Seek help when you need it- don't be alone when you don't need to be!* Seek help not just from your managers/ seniors, peers and team members also serve as great bouncing boards. *I do believe in the age old wisdom of having the wisdom to know what you cannot change, and need the need to accept it. Also helps to have a personal approach to re-energising oneself, making time for down-time/ me-time (be it reading, meditating, binging on brainless online content). It helps to have a meaningful identity and space beyond professional identity, which does not get defined only by martial and/ or motherhood status.*

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

First step is to consciously prioritise onboarding, retaining and promoting women. I worry less about having the right policies in place from a compliance perspective, it is more important to own those policies in spirit and make it visible in the organisational culture. No special favours but commitment to being an equal opportunity employer

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

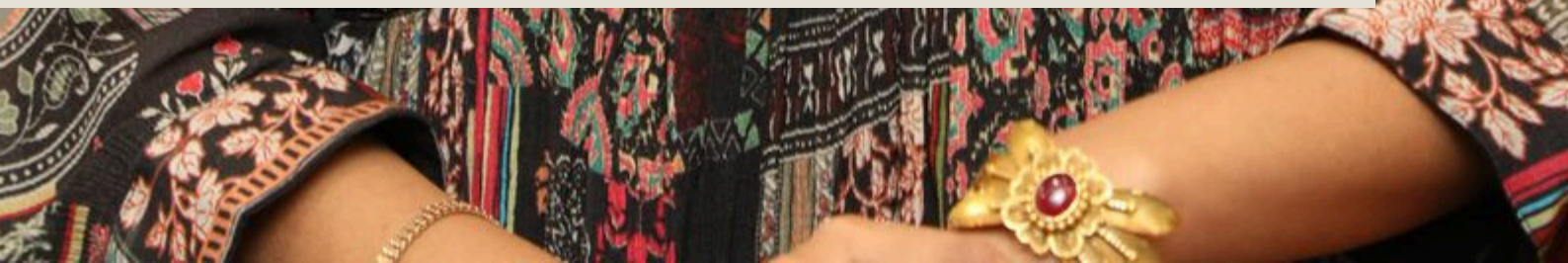
- Own your ambition
- Don't always wait for others to make the space, work hard and earn your stripes to take the space
- You do you, i.e., don't get boxed into how others expect you to behave/ show up, don't get defined by what a woman at your life stage is expected to show up as, personal time & responsibilities apply as much to a single woman as to a married woman with children, be honest about your need for personal time but never make that a convenient excuse for not showing up well
- *Doing it all/ having it all is a myth; women being portrayed as reincarnations of Maa Durga with multiple limbs and powers is not real life and should not be; pick your balls (i.e., multiple priorities) to juggle and balance*
- Find your tribe and lean on it, people around us we can learn from & mentors can become our super power



CA Swetha Girinatham

Chief Financial Officer, BMW TechWorks India Private Limited

'I set my own goals, learns from experiences, don't shy away from challenges and in single word "self-reliant"!'



CA SWETHA GIRINATHAM

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey

Leadership isn't defined by a title or position. It's earned by meeting the needs of those around you, offering support through their highs and lows, and delivering on the responsibilities of the organization. It's not something that can be explained in a single moment; it requires a deep connection with your team, seeing them as family. When you've empowered your team to perform and handle situations independently, even in the presence of CxOs, that's when you truly step into leadership. I'm proud that I had a team and have a team that can manage seamlessly, even without me. Once heard "True leadership is empowering your people to thrive independently, without relying on a leader."

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

I spent 8 years in the telecom sector, where the constant challenge of maintaining revenue and margins led me to collaborate closely with business teams, clients, and telecom network providers. The more I got involved, the more the requirements grew, and the greater job satisfaction I wanted to provide the teams that work for organisation. I've always felt it's my responsibility to solve problems or prevent them from arising. *I don't believe in calling myself a leader; instead, I let others define that for me.* By God's grace, I've received many positive comments, both directly and indirectly. One phrase that continually motivates me is, **"Any issue, reach out to Swetha, and the problem will be solved."**



What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

To be honest, when I focus on delivering my responsibilities, I never consider my gender. I always rely on my ability to handle situations with my intellect and capacity. If others focus on your gender, why should you let their perceptions affect you? You should find motivation within yourself. *No one needs to empower you—you are already born with the strength and power as a woman.*

CA SWETHA GIRINATHAM

Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them

I've faced bias due to my qualifications. I am a chartered accountant. Early on, one of the business acquaintances remarked that "CA are just numbers persons don't truly understand the business". Situations arose and I took charge of the business after the co-founder of Kaleyra India exited and successfully maintained the legacy for nearly two years. Of course, credit goes to him. He always wanted me to learn business.

What are the key trends shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

The automotive sector is evolving into the *autonomous driving sector, where technology is driving the industry forward rather than traditional machine manufacturing*. This shift emphasizes **mental ability over physical strength, and in a space where intellect matters, gender is irrelevant—everyone has the opportunity to seize the chance**

What skills do you believe are essential for future women leaders in your sector?

Understanding emerging technologies like *AI, machine learning, and automation* will be crucial for staying ahead in sectors like telecom and automotive, where innovation drives growth. The *ability to think long-term, anticipate market trends, and make decisions that align with both business goals and customer needs* will be essential. *Clear and effective communication is key, especially when leading diverse teams or negotiating with clients, partners, and stakeholders. Leveraging data analytics to make informed decisions is an important skill for leaders*, especially in sectors like telecom, where data and metrics shape strategies. Building a strong support system, fostering relationships, and mentoring others will help women leaders grow and build strong, diverse teams. These skills, combined with a growth mindset, will empower future women leaders to excel in their sectors.

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

you're never truly alone in your journey and building a reliable support system both professionally and personally is crucial. My family, colleagues, mentors, and friends have been key in helping me maintain balance.

Empowering my teams to make decisions on their own and keeping me informed has freed up my time, allowing me to focus on business growth without getting overwhelmed. On the personal side, the natural vegetables grown by my sister, plucked by my father, and cooked by my mom have been a vital part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle, which in turn supports my career by preventing health issues from becoming a distraction.

Additionally, having friends and cousin to talk to during my commute helps me stay grounded and relaxed. These conversations keep me cool, both mentally and emotionally, which is invaluable when juggling various responsibilities. With such a strong support system, balancing work and life becomes a lot more manageable and fulfilling.

CA SWETHA GIRINATHAM

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

Stress often comes when there's unnecessary pressure or when people poke at you without understanding the full picture. In those moments, *I've learned not to internalize everything*. After a period of intense work, I make sure to take breaks to recharge, but when things get overwhelming, I reach out to my parents to vent. It might sound funny, but it really works for me! *Letting out my frustrations and having an open, comforting conversation with them helps clear my mind and reset my mood*. It's all about finding what works for you to relieve stress and stay focused.

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

Women don't need empowerment because they're already powerful. The true shift comes when women realize and embrace that inner strength themselves. Motivation from others is temporary, but when you truly feel empowered within, that's what drives lasting change.

Organizations should *never question a woman's ability to balance home and work*. Once she decides to step out of the home, she already knows how to manage both effectively. What's needed from organizations is to *support women without judgment and, more importantly, to train men to respect and support women in the workplace and beyond*. *Respect should be inherent, and it's essential for building an environment where women can thrive*.

Moreover, organizations, schools, and communities should *conduct training on gender equality and respect—starting early in schools and continuing in workplaces*. In the modern world, women's safety is a critical issue, and any woman hesitating to showcase her mental strength is often doing so because of an unsafe or unwelcoming environment. If everyone truly respected women, there would be no barriers to women stepping forward and delivering extraordinary work. *Creating a safe and supportive environment allows women to shine and contribute to their fullest potential*.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

Absolutely! Women have always been powerful figures, and throughout history, including in great epics, we've seen that even gods turned to goddesses for guidance and strength. Satyabhama's defeat of Narakasura and Kaikeyi's role in saving Dasaratha during the war are just a few examples of how women's strength and wisdom have shaped critical moments. We are inherently powerful, and we don't need external inspiration; instead, we have the ability to inspire and lead.

My advice would be to stay independent, keep learning, and take responsibility—whether or not it's tied to a title or position. Once you take on that responsibility, focus on striving for the best outcomes, but remember, the process and effort matter more than the result. Let the journey drive you, not just the end goal



Dr Arpita Mukherjee

Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER)

Member of government committees and policy panels

PhD, International Economics, University of Portsmouth

'An enthusiastic researcher who wants to learn and explore you know areas within economic policymaking.'



DR. ARPITA MUKHERJEE

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

One defining moment in my leadership journey was during my PhD research on the labor market experiences of Indians in the UK. Around that time, Tony Blair introduced the New Deal policy, leading me to join the Policy Studies Institute. Under the mentorship of Steve Lissenberg, I learned that effective policy is cross-cutting—once you understand how to shape it, you can apply that skill across sectors.

This insight deepened when I worked on FDI in retail, where I saw firsthand how policy is influenced. While some believe media exposure or government positions drive change, I realized the true power lies in well-crafted research and writing. At the institute, they called it "*driving policy through the pen*"—a lesson that continues to shape my leadership and impact.

Please share about your Leadership Journey, how it started and evolved?

My leadership journey began with my parents, who prioritized education—especially for girls. Their only expectation was academic excellence, and we quickly learned that success in studies led to opportunities. This foundation instilled in me a relentless drive to excel.

A major turning point came after my marriage when I pursued my PhD. My husband, Shovik, became my strongest supporter and toughest critic. His management and engineering perspective challenged my research, teaching me that policy-driven work must be clear, actionable, and accessible. His insights pushed me to refine my ideas, ensuring my research had real-world impact.



Challenges as a Woman Leader: Like many women, I've faced challenges balancing career progression and personal responsibilities. However, working at ICRIER and the Policy Studies Institute, I was fortunate to have leadership that valued flexibility and research independence. My experience in the UK further shaped my work ethic, reinforcing that personal excellence drives organizational success.

I believe *true professional growth comes from aligning personal excellence with organizational success*. People don't work for organizations; they work for their own development. When individuals strive for excellence, the organization naturally thrives.

DR. ARPITA MUKHERJEE

When we talk about women leadership, there's a lot of discussion around biases I keep on hearing, about bias? So at a personal level, have you faced any such bias? And if you're faced, how did you navigate it over a period of time?

Bias in leadership is widely discussed, but *in research, your work is your strongest advocate*. Unlike corporate settings, merit often takes precedence—*strong research earns recognition*. While gender bias exists, the real challenge is ensuring women are placed in leadership roles based on merit, not preferential treatment. *Simply filling positions without considering skills undermines credibility*.

A critical turning point in my leadership journey was recognizing the need to break stereotypes. Women must be encouraged in all fields, not just those traditionally assigned to them. In workforce training, for instance, we shouldn't assume women belong in sewing jobs while men take on engineering roles. *Equal opportunity must be the norm, not the exception. One of the biggest hurdles for women is the middle-management gap, where many exit the workforce due to family responsibilities. Organizations must focus on retention strategies—flexible work, childcare support, and structured career pathways—to bridge this gap*. My upbringing shaped my leadership mindset—my parents instilled in me a drive for excellence, and my husband's critical perspective sharpened my ability to communicate complex ideas simply. Finally, my mother's lesson from my college days still resonates. She once questioned why I always took the designated women's seats on the bus instead of standing with the men. That moment taught me an important lesson: *privileges should be reserved for those who truly need them, not taken for granted*.

Women should be in leadership not because of gender, but because they are capable, driven, and deserving. True gender equality isn't about favoring one group over another; it's about creating a system where everyone has an equal chance to succeed based on merit.

What are the key trends for aspiring women leaders in Policy Research? How to leverage them?

Research today isn't limited to academia. It includes think tanks, consulting firms, government advisory roles, and independent policy work. Women can explore roles beyond teaching—such as *grant writing, data analysis, and policy advocacy*. *The research landscape now demands independent fundraising, client management, and proposal writing*. The ability to secure grants and maintain repeat clients is crucial for career growth. In today's world, visibility matters. *A strong social media and digital presence can amplify your research impact*.

The intersection of research with AI, data analytics, and behavioral sciences is reshaping policy. Women leaders should leverage cross-disciplinary skills to remain competitive. It's dynamic, demanding, and requires strong networking and logical acumen.

It's also a field where impact and positioning is key, one impactful paper can elevate your career, but one poorly received paper can set you back. The key is consistency, resilience, and a passion for continuous learning.

What skills do you believe are essential for future women leaders in your sector?

Policy research is a multi-disciplinary field that requires a combination of *legal awareness, data proficiency, and strategic thinking*. Understanding the legal aspects of policymaking ensures that recommendations align with governance and regulations, while **logical thinking** helps anticipate challenges and opposition. A **strong foundation in math, statistics, and data analysis** is essential, as policies rely on evidence, trends, and projections—without numerical literacy, researchers risk losing control of their work. Additionally, **strategic thinking and problem-solving** allow policymakers to predict trends, identify gaps, and propose well-structured solutions. Ultimately, effective policy research is about critical thinking, data-driven decision-making, and staying ahead of emerging challenges.

DR. ARPITA MUKHERJEE

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

Balancing work and personal life has been a journey of adapting to different stages. During my PhD, I juggled teaching, research, and motherhood, relying on my *mother's support*. Later, in my career, a demanding yet understanding boss (Prof Ahluwalia) taught me the value of multitasking—not just at work but in life. My *daughter, Srishti, also played a big role in making things easier. She was always an independent child, never bogged down by relatives telling her that her mother was busy working. In fact, she was proud of it. That confidence in her made a big difference. At home, I had a strong support system—my husband, who always encouraged my career, and long-term house help who made day-to-day logistics easier. Even during my PhD, I had an incredible child care support, Trish, without whom I might not have been able to complete my research.*

Professionally, I prioritize working with proactive researchers who push me forward. The key lesson I've learned is that seeking support—both personally and professionally—is essential.

Ultimately, it's about making intentional choices and ensuring that both personal and professional lives complement each other rather than compete.

What are your top pieces of advice for women aspiring to leadership roles in research?

- **Develop Independent Research Capabilities:** To grow as a leader in research, you must be able to produce independent work. This includes publishing papers, managing projects, and mastering proposal writing for grants and collaborations. Connecting your research to real-world applications and engaging with stakeholders strengthens your professional impact.
- **Make Your Work Visible:** Research is only impactful if it reaches the right audience. Presenting at conferences, publishing in journals, and participating in academic discussions help establish credibility. Resilience is key—overcome rejections, refine your work, and actively network to enhance visibility.
- **Embrace Management and Leadership:** Leadership in research is not just about academic excellence; it involves fundraising, team management, and mentoring. Researchers should take on responsibilities beyond their studies to develop managerial and strategic skills. Strong leadership fosters long-term career success and broader influence in the field.
- **Define Your Own Growth Path:** There is no single path to success in research leadership. Some researchers thrive as professors, while others make an impact in policy or institutional leadership. Identify your goals—whether influencing public policy, leading an institution, or excelling in academia—and align your career accordingly.

How can organizations become more inclusive to empower women in research?

Organizations are increasingly adopting gender-inclusive policies aligned with **UNSDGs**, but true inclusion lies in effective implementation. Equal access to *work-from-home options* and parental leave for both men and women is essential for shared domestic responsibilities. *Normalizing paternity leave ensures workplace policies reflect real equality.*

Women must be *aware of workplace harassment laws and maternity benefits while ensuring fair use of these rights*. Misuse can undermine opportunities for others, making fairness in practice crucial. A balanced approach strengthens inclusivity without unintended consequences.

In research, leadership is about impact, not just titles. Women should actively publish, present at conferences, and engage in discussions to establish their presence. True leadership is measured by impact and influence in the field.



Rashmi Anthony

Senior Vice President-Talent Development, Angel One Ltd.

Post graduations in HR, Marketing & Advertising & IR

'I am extremely passionate & super hardworking. My integrity and credibility come before anything else so whatever I do, I ensure that It's the best version.'

RASHMI ANTHONY

Can you tell us about your early influences and how they shaped your perspective and career ?

My biggest influence was my growing up ecosystem where I witnessed my father who was a CEO in Dubai, built his company from the ground up, scaling it to a valuation of 200–300 billion AED in the 1990s. His leadership and business acumen deeply influenced my interest in the people-driven aspects of business. *Pursuing three postgraduate courses was both challenging and enriching, offering exposure to diverse business functions.* The rigorous schedule of assignments and industry interactions provided invaluable insights, strengthening my strategic and analytical approach.

Can you share the major transitions in your career and the lessons they taught you?

My career journey has been shaped by transformative transitions and opportunities. I began at Cadbury, learning industrial relations in manufacturing, before moving to Satyam as an HR Business Partner, reporting to the CHRO. The Satyam crisis led me to Vodafone, where I pivoted into Learning & Development (L&D) with no prior experience. Immersing myself in sales, retail, and customer service, I built strong business acumen.

Moving on to Flipkart, I led leadership development in a fast-paced, evolving environment, honing my ability to drive impact with minimal direction.

When I joined Angel One, I saw it as a unique opportunity. Unlike my past roles where companies were facing turbulence, *Angel One was in a growth phase. The role allowed me to build something from scratch, and while I knew it would be a challenge, I saw it as a chance to prove myself. That's what drives me—taking on challenges, creating impact, and making a difference wherever I am..*

What keeps you motivated to do the kind of work you do? What drives you?

I am driven by a deep passion for excellence—ensuring that everything I take on is done to the highest standard. *Attention to detail is not just a habit; it is a mindset instilled in me from an early age. I do not settle for "good enough" because I believe every detail matters.*

I have never been competitive in a way that is driven by insecurity. I am confident in my abilities, which allows me to focus on the work itself rather than comparing myself to others. I naturally step up in high-pressure situations, and over time, this has built trust with teams and colleagues. People rely on me not just for results but for growth and learning, which makes leadership and team building incredibly fulfilling



What advice would you give to young women starting their careers?

The most valuable thing in the world is opportunity. Being open to learning and embracing every experience that comes your way can take you a long way. Success isn't purely about luck or just hard work—it's about recognizing and seizing the right opportunities when they arise.

RASHMI ANTHONY

As a woman leader, what major challenges have you faced? Have you encountered any bias in your career?

Biases exist, but for me, it has not been about outright discrimination. The challenge I have faced most often is being misrepresented or not taken as seriously unless I over-explain myself.

For instance, if a male colleague makes a statement, it's often accepted at face value. But if I, as a woman, do the same, I am expected to provide extensive context and justification before it's acknowledged in the same way. This expectation to provide "a prefix, a suffix, and everything in between" just to make a point is frustrating and a significant deterrent for women in leadership.

Additionally, personal-life biases exist. If I travel for work or stay late for meetings, I am often asked, "But don't you have kids? How do you manage?" No one asks my male colleagues these questions. These implicit biases create an added layer of expectation and scrutiny that women must navigate in leadership roles.

Some people argue that biases and challenges faced by women leaders are isolated incidents or that they are overanalyzed. How do you respond to that perspective?

I have often heard people say, "Oh, these are just one-off experiences," or "You're overthinking it—just ignore it." The expectation is that women should brush off biases and move on. It's a complex, gray area. Take workplace behavior, for example—if a woman drinks or smokes at a social event, it becomes a topic of discussion. There's an unspoken yardstick for women leaders that doesn't seem to apply to men in the same way. Even when women achieve great professional success, winning industry awards or leading major initiatives, the recognition often feels muted.

Similarly, the perception of women in leadership is often unfairly linked to their personal lives. If a woman leader is assertive, people might say, "Oh, she must be like this because she's divorced" or "She doesn't have a family to balance her out."

Ultimately, real progress on gender diversity and inclusion doesn't just happen in the workplace—it starts at home. The way men perceive and interact with women in professional spaces is often shaped by their personal experiences. I've seen that men with successful working wife often have a different approach to respecting women at work. It's a shift in mindset that has to be cultivated early, and that's where real change begins. So, while these biases may not always be explicit or intentional, they exist. Acknowledging them and having open conversations is the first step toward real inclusion.

What kind of skills should women develop to enter the fintech industry?

Fintech is a rapidly evolving space, and while domain knowledge in financial services or technology is valuable, the real differentiators are adaptability and agility. The most crucial skills include:

Resilience and Adaptability – Fintech is highly dynamic, with constant regulatory changes, partnerships, and mergers. The ability to pivot quickly is key.

Managing Ambiguous Stakeholders – Unlike traditional sectors, fintech has fluid stakeholder relationships. Today's partners could be tomorrow's competitors. Navigating these complexities is essential.

Business Acumen and Financial Literacy – While technical skills are critical, understanding how financial models work and how they integrate with technology can set you apart.

Fungibility and Cross-functional Skills – The most successful professionals in fintech are those who can work across multiple verticals and functions, adapting to new roles as the industry shifts.

Tech Awareness, Including AI and Digital Tools – While you don't necessarily need to be an engineer, having a working knowledge of AI, automation, and digital platforms can significantly enhance your impact.

At the end of the day, fintech is about speed and innovation. Certifications and degrees can help, but the real success factor is how well you can navigate uncertainty and drive impact in an evolving landscape.

RASHMI ANTHONY

How do you maintain work-life balance, and what keeps you grounded?

Balancing professional and personal responsibilities is not always easy, but I've learned that taking time for myself is essential. *I make it a point to spend some time every day introspecting—reviewing what went well, what didn't, and ensuring that my internal validation is my primary benchmark, rather than external opinions.* Over the years, I've shifted from measuring success through others' perceptions to valuing my intent and effort.

As the 'go-to' person in my family, I've had to set boundaries—*learning when to step in, listen, or let things unfold.* I remind my loved ones that I am not a superwoman, and they don't need to compare themselves to me.

A strong support system has been crucial. My husband, in particular, has played a vital role, standing by my ambitions even when societal expectations suggested otherwise. His support was especially important when he faced a severe health scare in form of cancer just weeks before I gave birth to my twins. Facing that challenge together reinforced our partnership and long-term goals.

Today, we operate as a team, sharing responsibilities so that I never have to choose between my career and family. Our mutual support system is what allows me to navigate both aspects of life effectively.

How can organizations be more inclusive for women?

Most organizations today have policies in place to ensure fairness and equity, but true inclusivity goes beyond policies. One critical area for improvement is supporting women in the early stages of their careers. Many organizations focus on broad diversity programs, but entry-level women often face a different challenge: intense competition rather than outright discrimination. To foster inclusivity, companies should:

Facilitate mentorship and networking – Connecting young women with experienced female leaders within the organization can provide them with guidance and inspiration.

Invest in upskilling – Instead of creating separate career paths for women, organizations should focus on equipping them with the skills and opportunities to advance on merit.

Another key consideration is career acceleration. Many women in India, for instance, reach mid-management before external factors (like marriage or relocation) influence their careers. *By proactively identifying and nurturing female talent early on, companies can build stronger pipelines for women leaders. It's not just about having inclusive policies—it's about actively investing in women's growth and ensuring their presence isn't just for representation but for real impact*



Aman Pannu

Head- Corporate Communications & CSR, DCM Shriram Ltd

Member of CII committees and Policy Panels

Education in Mass Communication

'I truly believe in the power of empathy and purpose.'

AMAN PANNU

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

The defining moment in my career was support work we as an organization did for communities during COVID-19. *The crisis amplified vulnerabilities in communities, and as a social sector leader, I had to navigate uncertainty while ensuring rapid and effective interventions.* Spearheading relief efforts—ranging from livelihood support to healthcare accessibility—taught me the true essence of leadership: resilience, empathy, and adaptability. More importantly, it reaffirmed my belief that organizations with a strong legacy have the power to create lasting change. This experience not only shaped me but also deepened my commitment to CSR, as I witnessed firsthand how purpose-driven actions can uplift lives in the most challenging times.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

Being part of DCM Shriram Ltd- a conglomerate in the business of Agri-Rural, Chloro-Vinyl and Value Added it has given me the unique opportunity to create impact across industries, shaping social progress in communities around the manufacturing facilities. *What inspired me to step into leadership was the ability to drive large-scale transformation—whether through innovation, sustainability, or CSR initiatives that directly improve lives.*

What keeps me motivated is the power of purpose-driven leadership. *Seeing how strategic decisions can uplift communities, enhance sustainability, and create long-term value fuels my passion.* The opportunity to work within a legacy organization that values both business excellence and social responsibility keeps me driven to push boundaries and make a lasting impact.



Biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them

I consider myself lucky to be part of an organization where I have always been valued for my work and not defined by my gender. However, I recognize that many women do face challenges in leadership, and *I've made it a personal mission to create a culture where everyone feels comfortable, heard, and supported. One of the biggest challenges I've focused on is addressing biases—ensuring that diverse perspectives are embraced and that the workplace fosters an environment where people from different backgrounds can thrive.*

AMAN PANNU

What are the key trends shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

As a conglomerate, we operate across multiple sectors, each evolving rapidly with digital transformation, sustainability, and inclusivity at the forefront. The shift towards ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance), AI-driven decision-making are creating new opportunities for women to step into leadership roles. Women can leverage these trends by actively engaging in strategic decision-making, championing sustainable initiatives, and embracing technology to drive innovation. The rise of purpose-driven business models also aligns with the strengths many women bring—collaborative leadership, empathy-driven decision-making, and a focus on long-term impact. By positioning themselves as key contributors to these evolving landscapes, women can shape the future of business.

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

Balancing professional and personal life is always a work in progress, but I've learned that setting clear priorities and boundaries is key. *I do remind myself that balance isn't about perfection but about making conscious choices that align with my values.*

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

In high-pressure situations, I focus on what I can control, break challenges into manageable steps, and lean on my support system—whether it's my team, mentors, or family. But most importantly, I remind myself why I do what I do—having a strong sense of purpose fuels my ability to navigate challenges with clarity and confidence.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

Believe in your voice, invest in continuous learning, and don't be afraid to take up space. Leadership is not about waiting for the perfect opportunity—it's about stepping up, even when you feel unprepared. Seek mentors, build strong networks, and surround yourself with people who uplift and challenge you. Most importantly, stay true to your purpose. When you lead with authenticity and confidence, you create impact beyond just titles or roles.

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

Organizations can foster inclusivity by ensuring that policies, cultures, and leadership mindsets actively support women's growth. This means going beyond just representation—it's about creating pathways for women. But **most importantly, organizations must cultivate a culture where diverse perspectives are valued, and women feel empowered to lead with confidence.**



Dr. Meenakshi Hardi

Director, Head of Materials Science Product Management,
MilliporeSigma ,USA

PhD in Materials Science

'I have been driven by a deep passion for science and its power to positively impact people's lives.'

DR. MEENAKSHI HARDI

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

A defining moment in my career came early when I was given the opportunity to step into a people management role. At that point, I was relatively new to leadership, and the trust placed in me pushed me to grow much faster than I had expected. I had to quickly adapt, not only to the skills needed for my role but also to learning about my new responsibilities as a people manager, including understanding the strengths and challenges of each team member. It was my responsibility to empower and motivate them, help them develop their skills, and foster collaboration across different teams to achieve our team goals.

This experience taught me that leadership is about more than just making decisions—it's about connecting with people, helping them thrive, and ensuring everyone feels valued. I learned the importance of empathy, clear communication, being approachable, and adaptable in how I approach challenges. These lessons have shaped my leadership journey and continue to guide my approach every day.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

The life sciences and chemical industries are at the forefront of transformative innovations—whether it's advancing healthcare, fostering sustainability, or addressing some of the world's most critical challenges. From the very start of my career, I've been driven by a deep passion for science and its power to positively impact people's lives. As I started transitioning to industry, *I learned that I not only need to ensure I have good results backed by strong data, but also effectively communicate my results and generate excitement amongst my managers and peers.* This shift in mindset helped me move up in my career into leadership roles. I chose to pursue leadership in this industry because of the incredible potential it offers to create meaningful change through science. *The opportunity to contribute to a field that can improve health outcomes and the environment is truly inspiring.*



What continues to motivate me is the dynamic nature of our field. Every day presents new challenges, discoveries, and opportunities to make a tangible impact. The chance to lead a team and watch them grow, succeed, and achieve their goals is incredibly rewarding. ***Knowing that the work we do has the potential to influence not only the business but also to change lives on a global scale is what truly fuels my passion for this industry.***

DR. MEENAKSHI HARDI

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

I've been fortunate to work in a company and industry that promotes gender equality and empowers women to grow into leadership roles. This inclusive culture has had a big impact on my journey. While I haven't faced many of the challenges that women leaders in other industries might face, I have still had to navigate the balance between being a woman in leadership and managing family responsibilities.

In the beginning I focused on building my reputation, I made sure my voice was heard in a way that felt authentic and confident. I worked hard to ensure my ideas were valued. I focused on building strong relationships, building trust, showing up confidently, and proving my impact with results.

I also built a strong bond with other experienced women leaders, seeking their advice, which helped me grow and develop. The most important part of my journey has been the culture at my company. It encourages collaboration, people development and provides equal opportunity. Being in an environment that actively supports women in leadership roles has made a big difference.

Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them?

I've been lucky to work for a company that truly supports women in leadership and values equality. Although I have not encountered many stereotypical biases, I have consistently prioritized delivering high-quality work, maintaining confidence, and fostering strong, trusting relationships with my colleagues.

When I have encountered more subtle biases, I have found that the most effective way to address them is by leading through action. *I demonstrate my capabilities through results and ensure that my voice is heard in decision-making. Additionally, I strive to foster an environment where everyone, regardless of gender, feels comfortable sharing their ideas. I also believe in building strong one-on-one connections with individuals beyond my immediate team.*

What are the key trends shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

The life sciences and chemical industries are going through big changes in areas like *sustainability, digitalization, and advanced technologies such as AI, materials science, and biotechnology*. **Digital transformation** is helping companies make data driven decisions, automate processes, and develop new products. **Biotechnology and personalized medicine** are also reshaping healthcare, offering exciting growth opportunities. **Sustainability** is a major focus, with companies working to reduce their environmental impact and create eco-friendly solutions. Women leaders in these industries have a unique opportunity to shape these changes. By ensuring one carves out time to continuously learn about emerging technologies—such as AI, digital tools, and advancements in biotechnology, materials science, sustainability—women can drive both their own growth and the growth of their teams. Staying at the forefront of these focus areas allows women to lead innovation, embrace new solutions, and create impactful strategies that support the ongoing transformation in the life sciences and chemical industries.

What skills do you believe are essential for future women leaders in your sector?

Women leaders can excel by developing strategic thinking to navigate long-term industry trends and drive innovation. Technical expertise and continuous learning are essential in an evolving landscape shaped by biotechnology, materials science, and digital advancements. Strong communication skills, emotional intelligence, and team-building abilities foster inclusive and motivated teams. Resilience and adaptability enable leaders to thrive amid rapid changes, while mentorship and advocacy help cultivate the next generation of talent. By mastering these skills, women will not only advance in leadership but also shape the future of the industry

DR. MEENAKSHI HARDI

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

Achieving work-life balance is an ongoing and evolving process. Over the years, I've learned that balance doesn't necessarily mean equal time spent between work and personal life but rather ensuring that I can give my full attention to whatever I'm doing in the moment, whether it's work or personal time. One of the key strategies that helps me maintain this balance is setting clear boundaries. For example, I prioritize my most important tasks at work and also spend time on planning for the day and week ahead. At the same time, I also try to make sure to block off personal time, example evenings or early mornings. I also use technology and digital tools to streamline both my work and personal life, helping me stay efficient and avoid unnecessary burnout. I've also learned to embrace flexibility. There are times when work demands more of my time, but I make it a point to adjust when I can—whether that's taking time off to rest when things settle down or adjusting my schedule for personal commitments. *One of the things that I had to learn very early on is the ability to deprioritize, ask for help and delegate and also say no when needed.*

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

I handle stress by stepping back to see the bigger picture, breaking tasks into manageable steps, and setting priorities with daily checklists. I also practice mindfulness and take breaks to stay focused. Resilience comes from strong support at work and in my personal life—leaning on my team, building relationships, and openly discussing challenges helps me stay mentally and emotionally strong while finding solutions together.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

To young women aiming for leadership roles, I'd say: believe in your abilities and stay committed to your growth. There will be challenges, but your skills and perspective are valuable in any leadership role. Build a strong foundation in your field, stay curious about new technologies, and develop qualities like empathy, resilience, and teamwork.

I'd also suggest building a network of mentors and advisors who can offer guidance and different viewpoints throughout your career.

And remember to make yourself heard, your voice matters. Share your ideas, and don't be afraid to take on leadership roles, even if they seem out of reach. Leadership is earned, but it's also a mindset. Own it from the start.

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

First, they need to provide equal opportunities for growth and advancement. This means offering leadership development programs, mentorship opportunities, and clear paths for women to move up in their careers. It's important for women to see that there's support and a clear way to reach leadership roles.

Creating an inclusive culture is also important. Companies should encourage diverse viewpoints and make sure women's voices are heard at all levels. This means making sure meetings and decision-making are open and that women feel comfortable speaking up without fear of bias.

Additionally, workplace flexibility is important, especially for women balancing family responsibilities with professional goals. Flexible work hours, hybrid or remote work options, and family-friendly policies go a long way in helping women stay engaged and excel in their roles.



Gauri Das

Head HR, India Factoring and Finance Solutions Pvt Ltd
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'My mantra has always been: Be limitless, be a possibilitarian.'

GAURI DAS

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

One of the most defining moments in my career was when I first realized that leadership isn't about authority or titles—it's about influence, empathy, and empowering others. I began to understand the importance of bringing others along on that journey. *The realization came when I was given the opportunity to lead a diverse team, and I saw how different leadership styles could inspire and bring out the best in people.* That moment helped me define *my approach to leadership as situational leadership, where I adapt my style to the needs of the team and the situation.* It's not about one-size-fits-all leadership, but understanding when to lead from the front, when to support from behind, and when to step back and allow others to lead. This experience shifted my perspective and shaped how I lead today, with a focus on empowering and uplifting those around me.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

My journey into leadership was inspired by a deep desire to make a meaningful impact and to help others realize their potential. Growing up in a small village with limited resources, I didn't have access to many opportunities, but I was determined to learn and grow. As I advanced in my career, I saw firsthand how leadership can shape organizations, empower individuals, and drive transformation.

What motivates me is the ability to create environments where people feel seen, heard, and empowered to achieve more than they ever thought possible. Knowing that I can help others grow, unlock their potential, and make a positive difference in their lives continues to fuel my passion for leadership. It's not just about the impact I make personally, but about creating a legacy of empowered leaders.



My mantra has always been: Be limitless, be a possibilitarian.

I truly believe that there are no boundaries to what we can achieve when we embrace the mindset of endless possibility. Leadership, in my eyes, is about embracing challenges, viewing them as opportunities for growth, and helping others do the same. It's about fostering an environment where everyone feels empowered to take risks, fail forward, and constantly evolve.

GAURI DAS

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

The path to achieving your goals generally doesn't come easy. Same goes for me. Coming from a small village with limited opportunities, I faced numerous challenges. The language barrier, lack of resources, and access to quality education were significant hurdles. As someone educated in a vernacular medium, I initially struggled with fluency in English, which I saw as a key to unlocking bigger opportunities. The scarcity of resources and exposure to broader perspectives made it hard to imagine a future beyond my small town.

Later on, one of my greatest challenges was the pressure I put on myself. I had this idealized image of being a "superwoman"—someone who could juggle everything flawlessly and excel in all areas of life. This self-imposed expectation often led to burnout and feelings of inadequacy. I felt the weight of needing to be perfect, which sometimes hindered my ability to move forward.

But over time, I realized that striving for perfection was unrealistic and unhealthy. I learned to embrace my imperfections and to prioritize what truly mattered. *The biggest barrier I had to overcome was not external, but the pressure I placed on myself. Now, I understand that being a "superwoman" doesn't mean doing everything flawlessly—it means showing up, doing my best, and growing along the way. This shift in mindset has been pivotal in my journey, allowing me to push past challenges and embrace growth in every aspect of my life.*

What are the key trends shaping Human Resources, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

The field HR is rapidly evolving due to technological advancements and changing workforce dynamics. HR professionals must adapt to stay relevant and continue adding value to organizations. Here are key trends shaping the future of HR:

Technology Integration: Automation, AI, and data analytics are transforming HR functions. AI-driven recruitment and data insights will help HR professionals make informed decisions, enhance efficiency, and deliver personalized employee experiences.

Employee Well-being and Mental Health: Employee wellness now goes beyond physical health to include mental well-being. HR is focusing on holistic wellness programs, mental health support, and work-life balance initiatives to promote overall employee health.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI): DEI remains a priority as organizations recognize the value of diverse teams. HR will continue to implement initiatives to ensure inclusive, equitable workplace cultures that foster innovation and performance.

Upskilling and Reskilling: As industries evolve, HR will focus on upskilling and reskilling programs to equip employees with the necessary skills for future roles and help them remain competitive in the changing job market.

Five Generations Working Together: With alphas entering, soon five generations will be present in the workforce, HR must develop strategies to bridge generational differences. This includes fostering collaboration, respect, and understanding across diverse age groups, ensuring an inclusive work environment that leverages the strengths of all generations.

GAURI DAS

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

Achieving work-life balance is no longer practical in today's fast-paced world; instead, *we must focus on work-life integration, where personal and professional lives are seamlessly interconnected to foster overall well-being.* Rather than rigidly separating work from personal life, this integrated approach encourages flexibility, ensuring that both domains complement each other in a way that nurtures an individual's overall health and satisfaction. But is a two-way street. Both employee and employer need to show flexibility. It is critical that we look at all aspects of well-being and not just a few. Equal focus on physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and financial health, is important to truly achieve balance.

What can one do for overall wellness?

A holistic approach to well-being considers all areas of life, and it's crucial that we focus on nurturing every dimension to thrive. Today's workplaces, by supporting flexible schedules, remote work, and mental health resources, provide employees with the tools to balance work demands while addressing personal needs. It is important to encourage individuals to prioritize their health and invest in emotional and mental wellness. It contributes significantly to long-term happiness and productivity. Also, promoting a healthy work culture where personal growth, learning, and stress management are prioritized helps individuals feel supported both professionally and personally.

Leaders must cultivate a workplace that encourages employees to take time for themselves, pursue personal goals, and find meaning in both their work and their personal lives.

What are your suggestions to empowering the Next Generation women leaders?

Empowering the next generation requires more than just teaching them technical skills or academic knowledge. It involves guiding them through inner work, which helps foster self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-leadership. Internal qualities and intrinsic motivation are essential for navigating the complexities of life and making a meaningful impact in the world. Inner work is the practice of going beyond surface-level achievements and connecting with one's core values, beliefs, and emotions. Through inner work, we can identify our strengths and areas for growth, build resilience, and cultivate emotional intelligence. This process of self-discovery is key to understanding how we react to challenges, and it prepares us for life's inevitable ups and downs. It empowers us to take ownership of their actions and choices, which leads to greater self-confidence and a deeper sense of purpose.

- *Self-awareness helps individuals understand their emotions, strengths, and blind spots, enabling better decision-making and emotional intelligence.*
- *Self-acceptance builds resilience by embracing imperfections and reducing dependence on external validation.*
- *Self-leadership nurtures accountability, initiative, and goal setting, equipping young leaders to navigate challenges with confidence.*

By cultivating these qualities, young women can lead with authenticity, purpose, and impact.

Anita Catherine D'Souza

Head, Human Resources, Pepper Advantage India
Post graduation in Human Resources

*An open, honest, value driven individual who isn't afraid to
face a challenge, with a zest for life.*



ANITA CATHERINE D'SOUZA

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

It is difficult to narrow down on a single moment as I have learnt & grown through the experiences & challenges I have faced through my career. But if I must state an experience that showcased my leadership abilities, was the time I got an opportunity to spearhead a project at an early stage in my career where I moved 900+ employees from one group company to another. It was the first time I was interacting with senior leadership members, in an unknown territory since I too had just moved to that group company. I was training staff within the HR team to manage the transition, I was negotiating roles & fitments and mitigating the challenges that came along with this transition. I knew I was doing it right and an affirmation was the compliment 'Because of her it is managed well' that too by a leader I always thought who wasn't too fond of me.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

I did not pursue Leadership, I simply pursued my learning journey, striving to do things better, wanting to try things or role that I haven't before and embracing challenges. This has led me to where I am, and the journey continues.

Each time I am able to a make a difference, that is my motivation. It could be in the form of an influence or change or value that may have a tangible or perceived benefit. Whatever you do the outcome must be meaningful is the mantra.

Advice to young women aspiring to leadership roles: "Strive to be a better version of you by pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone at the same time, always be yourself and cut the noise."



What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

Preconceived notions, biases and egos where it is difficult for the opposite gender to accept a woman leader or counterpart with a mind of her own. Common challenges I am sure most of my women colleagues would have faced whether in their careers or sometimes even at home.

To tackle these, I simply continued to be myself and let my work do the talking. More importantly I chose my battles and learnt to let go not giving into the temptation of always trying to prove the point.

ANITA CATHERINE D'SOUZA

Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them?

I sure have encountered biases in my career, the most common being stereotyping. For e.g. *a man's assertive behaviour in the workplace is often interpreted as strong, commanding, and direct, while if a woman displays the same assertiveness, she would be seen as being aggressive or pushy.*

The way I navigated these situations, as I responded to the previous question, I *simply continued to be myself and let my work do the talking.* More importantly I chose my battles and learnt to let go not giving into the temptation of always trying to prove the point or getting impacted by opinions.

What are the key trends shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

AI / Generative AI in the financial services industry is a major trend that is shaping the future of how most companies work or the service offerings that will be provided to customers.

By distinguishing themselves as change agents and embracing the skill sets that are quickly becoming not only essential but the way of life, women can redefine leadership roles of the future.

What skills do you believe are essential for future women leaders in your sector?

Leadership skills I believe are sector or gender agnostic. With changing times & the way we conduct business, agility and adaptability have become essential leadership skills that top the charts.

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

While I am blessed with a strong family foundation but one of the mantras, I have learnt with time is, 'If it is to be it is up to me' I need to focus on what is important to and for me. No one else will.

I learnt a very important lesson from the CEO of one of the organization's I worked for. He would often say, 'While taking a flight, what is the most important message you hear? Secure yourselves, before helping Others'.

Women especially, often keep themselves & their wellbeing in the backburner while prioritising all others. I strongly advocate to the thought when you yourself are happy, healthy – mentally and physically can you fulfil your responsibilities appropriately, whether at home or at the workplace.

Hence seeking time out or help when required without hesitation or feeling guilty is required. You have to say it like it is, do what is most required.

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

Simply by being myself. I do vent out if I must (responsibly), take a step back and refocus, engage in something that will temporarily distract and then get back with a calmer mind. What is important is to acknowledge the situation at hand exists and can be dealt with just like the many others that you already have. Just continue to focus!

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

In one of the organizations I worked for, the CEO asked me, as a Woman how do we create a better workplace for you, what can we do, and my response was ***"Treat me as a regular Employee. Appoint for skills, incentivize for performance and create a fair & safe working environment which is a basic right for all"***.

Ruchika Verma

Senior Group Legal Counsel,
Ericsson
B Com (H), LL.B

'Self-lover'



RUCHIKA VERMA

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

Finding the right mentor at the right time who helped me work 360 degree on my professional skills and confidence.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

Motivation comes from the everyday opportunities to help business solve their problems (in uncomplicated ways)

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

My own lack of confidence which prevented me from speaking publicly until I knew the subject 100% and over apologizing. Reading books and articles by great women like Sherly Sandberg opened my eyes to these problems. Now I hope with awareness, I am able to handle these effectively.

Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them?

This question reminds me of a remark/unsolicited advice a former manager gave me on my last day of work at an organization. He told me that sometimes I get too assertive which hurts man's ego!! I chose to ignore him and later I blocked his number and never corrected this habit of mine!!

**What are the key trends shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?**

Woman leaders are just like any other leader, so the answer is same irrespective of the gender and it is – *stay updated and stay relevant.*

Ultimately, leadership success isn't about gender—it's about adaptability, vision, and impact. Women leaders can leverage these trends by staying informed, continuously evolving, and leading with confidence.

RUCHIKA VERMA

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

I strive for **completion rather than perfection** in everything I do. It's easier said than done, but I consciously work on it because perfectionism can be a major roadblock to efficiency and well-being. By focusing on delivering quality work within a reasonable timeframe rather than endlessly refining, I free up time for personal life and self-care.

Another key strategy is **setting boundaries**—whether it's defining work hours, prioritizing tasks effectively, or knowing when to step back and recharge. I also believe in leveraging support systems—delegating where possible, collaborating effectively, and recognizing that success is never a solo journey.

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

Managing stress is essential, and I have a few go-to strategies. *Weekend spas and meditation* are my personal ways of unwinding, allowing me to reset mentally and physically. Spa treatments help me relax and recharge, while meditation cultivates mindfulness, clarity, and resilience.

Additionally, I believe in **perspective management**—reminding myself that challenges are temporary and that even in high-pressure situations, focusing on solutions rather than problems is key.

What advice would you give to young women aspiring to leadership roles?

Stay true to yourself. Your innate nature and authentic self are your biggest strengths. Confidence comes from self-acceptance, not from trying to fit into predefined leadership molds. There is no need to ape man at all, *there's no need to mimic male leadership styles—great leadership comes in many forms, and diverse approaches bring value to organizations.*

I also encourage young women to speak up, take risks, and seek mentorship. Surround yourself with people who uplift and challenge you and never hesitate to take opportunities that push you out of your comfort zone. Leadership is as much about learning and evolving as it is about leading others.

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

True inclusion means equal opportunities and flexibility for both men and women. Organizations should recognize that caregiving responsibilities—whether for children or elderly parents—are not just a woman's responsibility. *Work-from-home (WFH) options should be available to both men and women so that family care does not become a career-limiting factor for women.*

Beyond policies, companies need to foster a culture where women are valued for their capabilities and leadership potential, not just for their ability to "manage it all." This means addressing biases, ensuring equal pay, promoting more women into leadership, and creating mentorship programs that actively support women's career growth

Komal Machindar

Vice President, LTIMindtree

B.E. Computer Science

"Darr ke aage Jeet Hain."



'My advice to all the young women is to develop one important skill, and that is "Courage." Go all out for the careers you dream of, take the initiative, and explore. The ride will be adventurous and worth every bit.

There is absolutely nothing that you cannot achieve. If you want others to believe in you, then you must believe in yourself first. Whatever you think about yourself is what others will think. So do not undermine yourself at all. You already have within you what it takes to be a successful leader; just sharpen the skills and take the leap. And I say leap, not step, deliberately because it takes courage to take the leap.'

– Komal Machindar

KOMAL MACHINDAR

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped your leadership journey?

While I was in delivery Excellence, I aspired to join Project Management and to my delight, my Manager, who is also my mentor, welcomed me and helped me succeed in my new role. This boosted my confidence and encouraged me to navigate unknown waters. After that, I moved into different roles, actively seeking and asking for them. This defining moment in my career significantly shaped my leadership journey, demonstrating the importance of mentorship and the willingness to embrace new challenges.

What inspired you to pursue leadership in your industry, and what keeps you motivated?

I have always enjoyed working with people, and I believe aligning team goals can lead to remarkable results. My first project using this approach was a learning experience for both me and my team. Our focus on communication and transparency led to reliable delivery and recognition.

My passion for leadership is driven by the desire to make a difference in my colleagues' lives and contribute to the organization's success. Watching my team members grow and reach their potential is very rewarding. This and the ever-evolving IT services sector keeps me motivated to stay ahead and continuously learn and adapt to new challenges.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman leader, and how did you overcome them?

Interestingly, I did not face any significant challenges as a woman leader within the organization beyond the balancing act required on the personal front. My organization has always been willing to provide opportunities to those who are eager and ready. Yes, there were challenges with children growing up and me juggling priorities, but my family supported me significantly. Furthermore, my ever-supportive team, colleagues, and managers played a crucial role in my journey.



What are the key trends shaping your industry, and how can women leaders leverage these opportunities?

There are so many changes happening in the industry and so many new opportunities opening. The technology coupled with AI has brought in constructive disruption which one should look at as your chance to transform your thinking, your way of working, and your work itself. I think it is the best time to come ahead and grab your take. As women leaders, we should learn the new way of working and take on the new challenges which are yet to be explored. It may sound scary but *"Darr ke aage Jeet Hain."*

KOMAL MACHINDAR

Have you encountered any biases in your career? If so, how have you navigated them?

Fortunately, I have not faced any biases, or perhaps being the positive person that I am, I didn't notice them. Nevertheless, I have always adhered to my belief that hard work combined with positive attitude can overcome any prejudice. By focusing on my goals and consistently delivering my best, I have been able to navigate my career path successfully.

What skills do you believe are essential for future women leaders in your sector?

To excel as a woman leader in the IT sector, certain skills are important. **Firstly, technical proficiency** is essential, as a deep understanding of the technological landscape and emerging trends can help anticipate and respond to changes effectively. **Secondly, strategic thinking and problem-solving abilities** are crucial, as they enable leaders to devise innovative solutions and make informed decisions that drive progress. **Thirdly, strong communication skills** are vital for articulating visions, goals, and strategies clearly and persuasively to diverse stakeholders. Additionally, *emotional intelligence is important for building and maintaining effective teams, fostering a supportive work environment, and navigating the complexities of interpersonal relationships.* Moreover, **adaptability and continuous learning are imperative in an industry characterized by rapid advancements and constant evolution.** Women leaders should *remain curious and open to acquiring new knowledge and skills to stay ahead of the curve.* Lastly, *fostering a collaborative spirit and promoting diversity and inclusion within teams can lead to richer perspectives, enhanced creativity, and better problem-solving outcomes.*

How do you balance professional responsibilities with personal life, and what strategies have helped you maintain this balance?

I get this question asked multiple times. There is no straightforward solution or balance. The strategy that I have employed is to focus on the project/task at hand. You need to be 100% present for the family or office. I have not mastered it 100% but with practice I am reaching there. I am very well aware of the choices that I make and hence I know it's me who needs to realign if need be. Complete responsibility for my choices has helped me achieve peace if not perfect balance.

How do you handle stress and maintain resilience in high-pressure situations?

You get stressed in stressful situations and that is why they are called that. I try and decipher what is it that is expected of me or the situation. **I focus on the outcome and not the problematic or stressful situation.** This helps me think in a focused manner and progress towards the desired outcome. I get there most of the times. Developing a mindset which helps me detach from the situation and think about the solution has helped me always.

How can organizations create more inclusive environments that empower women to lead?

Organizations have come a long way to create inclusive environments to empower women and it is very heartening to see that. However, *organizations and society as a whole need to recognize that women are different, and their needs will also be different. Their leadership styles will be different. All we have to do is accept this difference and align.* **Women are not asking for any entitlement or anything special, but want an equal ground to be able to compete.** We have to accept this difference as organizations and as societies at large.



INCREMENT-US

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COACHING, TRAINING, INTERVENTIONS, CONSULTING

About Increment-US: Increment-US is dedicated to advancing executive leadership through a comprehensive suite of programs, workshops, coaching, mentoring, and leadership development initiatives since 2018. Their Women Leadership Initiatives are designed to empower both aspiring and established women leaders by equipping them with strategic skills, confidence, and personalized coaching or mentorship to navigate leadership roles effectively.

Through executive coaching, transformational workshops, and interventions, Increment-US creates customised initiatives that enable women to enhance their leadership potential and drive meaningful impact within their organizations and industries. By fostering a dynamic community of female leaders, Increment-US inspires, equips, and supports women to excel in leadership and decision-making roles.



Increment-US

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