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Meet the 35 builders, innovators, activists and rulebreakers

stepping up and taking the reins. We're celebrating these young movers and shakers and inspiring young women all over the country to step up and follow their passions. The future is female, and this is the voice of the new generation...

Photographer **AMITHA THENNAKON**
Art Direction **RICARDO DE SILVA**

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Changing mindsets

Randhula De Silva, CEO of Hatch and Director of GIZ, is a disrupter at her core. And she's just getting started.

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI





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everything you do in life adds up to who you are today," Randhula De Silva says thoughtfully. I'm seated next to her on a comfy couch in the lounge area of Hatch Colombo, chatting about her very colourful professional background. She tells me there have been a few instances where her life has changed. "I've always wanted to give back to society and do something impactful and meaningful in life. I think it's a complexity us millennials feel! University exposed me to people of various ethnicities and faiths, and it was a good eye-opening experience. It made me want to do more work with communities."

Right after university, Randhula joined Verité Research as the Head of Information Intelligence Services, working on a signature product called Media Analysis. "We looked at the differences between Sinhala, English and Tamil media (because the media

portrays one incident in 3 distinct ways), how this affects the local dynamic and what the underlying intentions are of the media," Randhula explains. "I was 24-years-old and to be amongst so many researchers and analysts on this project gave me an in-depth understanding of society's structure and functions."

While Verité Research was fulfilling, Randhula knew she enjoyed working with people and moved from a desk job to one at the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) that took her into the field. "I've been with GIZ for seven and a half years, and when I joined, innovation and entrepreneurship weren't a focal area," she reveals. "With my background in business economics, I work well with the private sector, speaking their language and understanding the business element. But I'm always drawn towards working for the community, so I connected my two passions." Her work took her to Jaffna and soon realised they have a big innovation scene. In her attempt to see what communities are out there, she stumbled upon the Yarl IT Hub on Facebook. What started as writing a quick line, asking how she can help, blossomed into a strong

relationship with this group.

"Here's the thing, a lot of random donor money comes in, to tick the boxes. But not a lot of impactful or sustainable development happens frequently," Randhula explains. "But, there's also a lot of young, passionate people doing amazing work, wanting to create change, but are resistant to outside influence. So, it took a year and a half for me to build that trust before exchanging any money." Eventually, Randhula and GIZ plunged into supporting startups, and that's how she crossed paths with Jeevan Gnanam, the director of Hatch. Her involvement in Jaffna started a partnership among Yarl IT, GIZ and Hatch. "They did a lot of work in Jaffna, but they didn't have any space to explore more areas of work," she says. "We came up with the idea to create such a space, and do it in partnership with each other, so it's sustainable. Hatch would fabricate the space and Yarl IT would run it. And that took me to Hatch Colombo."

Over the past year, Randhula experienced so much of the Colombo startup community, and there's an apparent

difference between the vibe in this city compared to what's outside of it.

The talent and passion are similar, she shares, but elements like mindset and drive are different. "Through our many programs at Hatch, we always support the growth of entrepreneurs. It's altered how they work, but changing the mindset is the underlying element through these activities with Hatch and GIZ," Randhula reveals. "It's how you approach things and how you deal with people, including how you trust another person to go into a partnership or discuss your business idea because beautiful things happen when people come together."

Randhula experienced this in Jaffna. If it weren't for her coaxing, the space at Hatch wouldn't be. Now, the traditional parental community sees the value of it and don't feel threatened that their kids are doing something weird, like coding. "There are minuscule, intangible ripple effects that will create massive changes in the long term. We're shifting the minds of the people and their perceptions," she explains. "This is my passion. Sri Lankan markets are small, but our people and skill sets are unique, and we can harness and nurture this to shine as a nation."

Another keen focus for Randhula is Disrupt Asia,

an annual startup conference and innovation festival. It was after Randhula's input that the conference's structure changed, becoming more energetic and inviting to young individuals. "We're all trying to create change, and there are many people like you if you're willing to seek them out and listen to what they have to say. Building those bridges is what I do," she says. Yet another win for Randhula was kicking off the Good Life Accelerator, a 12-week long intensive business program for startups. "It was a big dream for a development agency," she tells me. "And to convince them to let you do it, struggle with it for one and half years, and see the name boards finally come up was an amazing feeling!"

If you're considering taking on the entrepreneur life, Randhula's advice is to be humble and open. "Listen to learn, not to respond. Everybody has something to give back if you really listen. Don't be afraid to change—it's amazing. If you're holding back, you're just standing in your own way." ☺

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Saving the environment

Anoka Abeyrathne, a conservationist and social entrepreneur, is only just getting started

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI





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hen I was little I wanted to be a veterinarian!" exclaims Anoka Abeyrathne. "But, thanks to a lot of negativity—you should be a doctor, I was told—I eventually pursued law." Anoka's turning point came during the tsunami when many lost loved ones, including her. "While I was grieving I tried to figure out what I can do to make sure another wave doesn't hit us," she tells me. "That's when the mangrove project began. I was 13-years-old when I started Sustain Solutions, the organization, and Growin' Money, the flagship program to plant mangrove trees."

It was a time before social media was popular and many people looked at her wondering how someone so young would know anything. But, by involving religious and community leaders, and other adults to help carry the message to as many people as possible, Anoka shared why they

needed to be a part of it. A business that started as 6 people has expanded to 5 countries. "Back then, I never could've imagined the success we've had!" she laughs. "We have teams across the world working on advocacy and lobbying governments. There are so many more aspects to it. We work with corporates, have partnerships, CSR events and more. It's grown into something with a life of its own!"

When Anoka and her team began, they focused their efforts in Bolgoda. A lot of garbage was dumped into the lake and trees were chopped down for firewood. "What people didn't realize was that Bolgoda lake is ideal for ecotourism allowing you to both preserve the environment and generate a solid income for the community," she shares. "But we didn't judge them for their actions, instead, we had honest conversations to figure out why this was happening and how it can be addressed differently."

Now, these communities have taken on the project, working from within. "You start something expecting it to last a few years, like putting enough trees to stop another wave, but when people take ownership to see it

through on their own, that's what you live for," reflects Anoka. Some of the other areas they work in are Ambalangoda, Batticaloa, Thalwatta, and a little in Muthurajawela. "It's different areas with estuaries because for mangroves to grow, you need a lot more saline in the water," she shares.

Getting the message out and creating awareness especially in young people is a part of their work, starting as young as nursery-goers. "That's when you start developing your curiosity," Anoka says. "We do our best to make sure they understand how important it is to co-exist and from there on we show people that if you have purpose, your life is a lot more fulfilling." They carry this message through a lot of PR through events, workshops, engaging with media and agencies, collaborating with local universities and even with international exchanges for foreign students with placements here.

"For the past year and a half, we've been providing more digital skills to people in Sri

Lanka, particularly female entrepreneurs in impoverished areas, like Monaragala and Badulla," explains Anoka. "What we're trying to do is motivate them to elevate their existing skills, on Instagram for example, to generate engagement and, ultimately, more sales." To do this a lot of digital training is required. At first, people were sceptical about the idea, believing they were too old to learn and the culture shock it brought with it. "Sri Lanka's digital penetration is very low, so more people need to hop on board. If they don't try, they will get left behind." So what did they do? They got down to their level, and spoke to them about their businesses and their issues, and offered more digital solutions. "A lot of female entrepreneurs are very keen to join us. Once you show them the potential—like how much you can earn off of YouTube—they're happy to give it a try," she says.

What's exciting to note is that a shift has taken place—more women are becoming entrepreneurs. A few years ago, if you wanted to become a business person, you'd be met with plenty of resistance. "Some of the things you'd hear are: 'Get a job', 'You're going to hate

doing this in a couple of years', or 'This isn't going to make you money', shares Anoka. "But now there's a huge drive towards entrepreneurship. Sri Lanka doesn't have jobs to offer everyone and if people start something in every town, you're employing everyone else. You're supporting each other and that's how communities are built."

The work Anoka has done is enormous and success has met her at every turn, like the Zonta Woman of Achievement Awards and Forbes' 30 Under 30. But she insists it's not due to her efforts alone. "It takes a small village!" she enthuses. "It's because of our passion and the work we've done as a team that led to some wonderful moments." As we part ways, she shares one last piece of wisdom: "Find your passion. Think about what legacy you want to leave and what you want to people to remember about you. Then go out there and do it." 🍷

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Letting
go of
fear

Oozing confidence, **Shalindri Malawana** learned a long time ago how to take on anything life thrust at her.

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI





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halindri Malawana's background is a whole mix of things. Her education was in fashion design but her professional choices led her down a completely different path. "I studied in Malaysia and worked there for a couple of years in public relations and marketing," she tells me. "The year I returned to Sri Lanka wasn't a great one for the fashion industry, so I asked myself what else I enjoyed doing. I narrowed in on events and PR." This led Shalindri to ABC Radio for a short stint followed by KISS FM for 3 years. "After a while, you plateau and find yourself seeking more fulfilment out of your career," she shares. "This is why I started sending out my CV, very randomly, not knowing what I desired to do or where I wanted to end up. All I knew was that I needed an active, fun role."

Rockland Distilleries (Pvt) Ltd was one of the places she applied to and they called her. They didn't necessarily have a position available, but her application piqued their interest. And, fast forward 5 years, Shalindri is the General Manager of Liquid Island, Rockland's non-alcoholic arm. "When I joined the organization, there wasn't a position," she says. "I was offered the title of Head of Retail for Wine World for a year and a half. My boss saw I was very happy doing events like wine and malt tastings, which eventually led to the creation of The Epicurean. It's an events company under Rockland that I headed for nearly 2 years." After some time, and being successful at every role handed to her, Shalindri was asked to take on the brand, Olu. It was a step away from the very fun, alcoholic arm of the company and she was sceptical if it was the right fit, but, as it turned out, Shalindri was the woman for the job. "I was General Manager for Olu and that snowballed into including Fever Tree and Monin, too."

Since the get-go, Shalindri has faced a variety of challenges, particularly making her mark in a

male-dominated industry. "When I was introduced as the Head of Retail for Wine World, not only was I apprehensive about the role, but that feeling seemed to be mirrored amongst the shop staff as well, initially," Shalindri

let go of the fear. It's never going to be all smooth sailing, but you push through

reflects. "Over time, things changed. See, in any office culture, especially in a male-dominated one, there will always be push back when a lady steps in. They'll challenge you and assume you don't know what you're doing. But it's about manoeuvring your way around it, asserting yourself where you have

to, even if it means coming off as aggressive." When Shalindri joined Rockland, there were a handful of women, but, soon, many changes took place. Today, the company has employed female staff well into the double digits.

With a passion for learning that reflects Rockland's core, Shalindri has learned how to be the best version of herself with every new role thrust upon her. "My boss always says, in any role, the key factors are common sense and learning, constantly expanding our knowledge and growing. And, you know what? He's right," she says. "Today, I'm certain I can walk into any role, take it on and be perfectly

alright." That's not something many women can attest to, and it's clear; it all boils down to the amount of confidence you have in yourself.

Like many women, Shalindri has experienced a phenomenon known as Imposter Syndrome. It's a psychological pattern where you doubt your accomplishments and have a constant internal

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Your biggest enemy is yourself, so conquer yourself first

fear of being exposed as a fraud, even if you're the most successful person in the room. "It's funny you should mention it," laughs Shalindri. "Because, I was telling a friend one day that I have this great position and I might get an even higher one, but I don't know if I deserve it. Sometimes I don't know if I'm doing it right, you know? He labelled it Imposter Syndrome too!" How does she navigate it? I ask. "You've got to have enough confidence in yourself," she tells me. "Let go of the fear. It's never going to be all smooth sailing, but you push through. It's an internal struggle, but, you should never hold back. Ask yourself, *what's the worst that can happen?* Your biggest enemy is yourself, so conquer yourself first." ©



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A journey of learning

There's no holding **Rathnakala Kumaragurunathan** back.

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI

FOR THE GRACEFULLY GUTSY



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athnakala Kumaragurunathan comes from a very conventional Jaffna-Tamil background where, for young women, a lot of focus is placed on education but not in the pursuit of a career. "Luckily my father challenged this and, for as long as I could remember, a career was on the cards," shares Rathnakala. So she went to a mixed international school for her education, also pursuing CIMA and a degree soon after. Today, she celebrates 13 years at Acuity Knowledge Partners (formerly Ambar Research), climbing up the ranks from a trainee to Associate Director.

Rathnakala tells me she owes all this success to passion, and amazing mentors from her father to the bosses she's had from the get-go. "It's been a wonderful experience during all of my 20s and now my 30s!" enthuses Rathnakala. "For the

longest time, my father showed me the way until his passing. And at work, I've had great managers who were also great mentors. All of them combined helped bring out the best in me."

"There are two elements about investment research that I'm passionate about — learning and contributing," she continues. "It's a very ruthless industry and you're only as good as your last deliverable. This means there is absolutely no room for complacency. You can do 13 years of absolutely good work, but if you drop the ball in your last year, you'll be remembered for only that. I love working under pressure and that's when my best comes out!" Rathnakala firmly believes that no matter what you do (even if it's something as simple as note-taking during a meeting), you need to do it excellently with attention to detail.

Throughout her journey, Rathnakala has learned to fall in love with the process and not the victory. "I know it's cliché, but if you love what you do and enjoy each day, hour or minute for itself, victory will come," she says. "I've always loved working with juniors. I always ask for freshers to catch them

young and watch them grow! It gives the job so much more meaning and the process is fun. So you need to enjoy it."

Rathnakala became a supervisor as early as 23-years-old, which meant a large part of her team was either her age or older, making the first few years very tough. "Many of the men were older than me and that presented a challenge," she says, thoughtfully. "It was very hard to get my point across, be heard or given respect. I was also naïve and afraid to be assertive—I thought the easier path was to be loved and popular. But, I eventually realized (through great mentors!) that my role was not to be loved but to be respected. If love came, that was a bonus."

What Rathnakala started doing then, and that subsequently helped with her mentoring role, was being very direct. "Now, my team knows, good or bad, you will know right away," she shares. "I won't wait 6 months to talk to someone about something they did then. I address the issue then and there and, sure, at that moment I know they hate me, but that's okay. It's not easy, but I keep

remembering all I want is respect, and that's a natural consequence of doing the right thing. Then it becomes contagious—you see the team doing the same! But not with everyone. You will always have a percentage of bad eggs, but that's okay as long as it's a minority."

The challenges kept coming, but Rathnakala kept dealing with them, learning from them and evolving into the self-assured woman I see sitting across from me. "In 2017, I faced one of the darkest times of my life. I was pregnant and had the baby, but a few hours later, he passed away," she recounts. "I knew I couldn't go back to work. I had borderline depression, but my bosses were supportive and told me to take my time and come back when I was ready." But, five months later, with no visible light at the end of the tunnel for her, Rathnakala's boss met with her realizing she was not healing. He insisted she return to work and a month later she did. "He gave me a new role, besides my existing one—I was to take over the training and knowledge function at Acuity," she shares. "And let me tell you, it was one of the best things he did for me, and I for myself by accepting it."

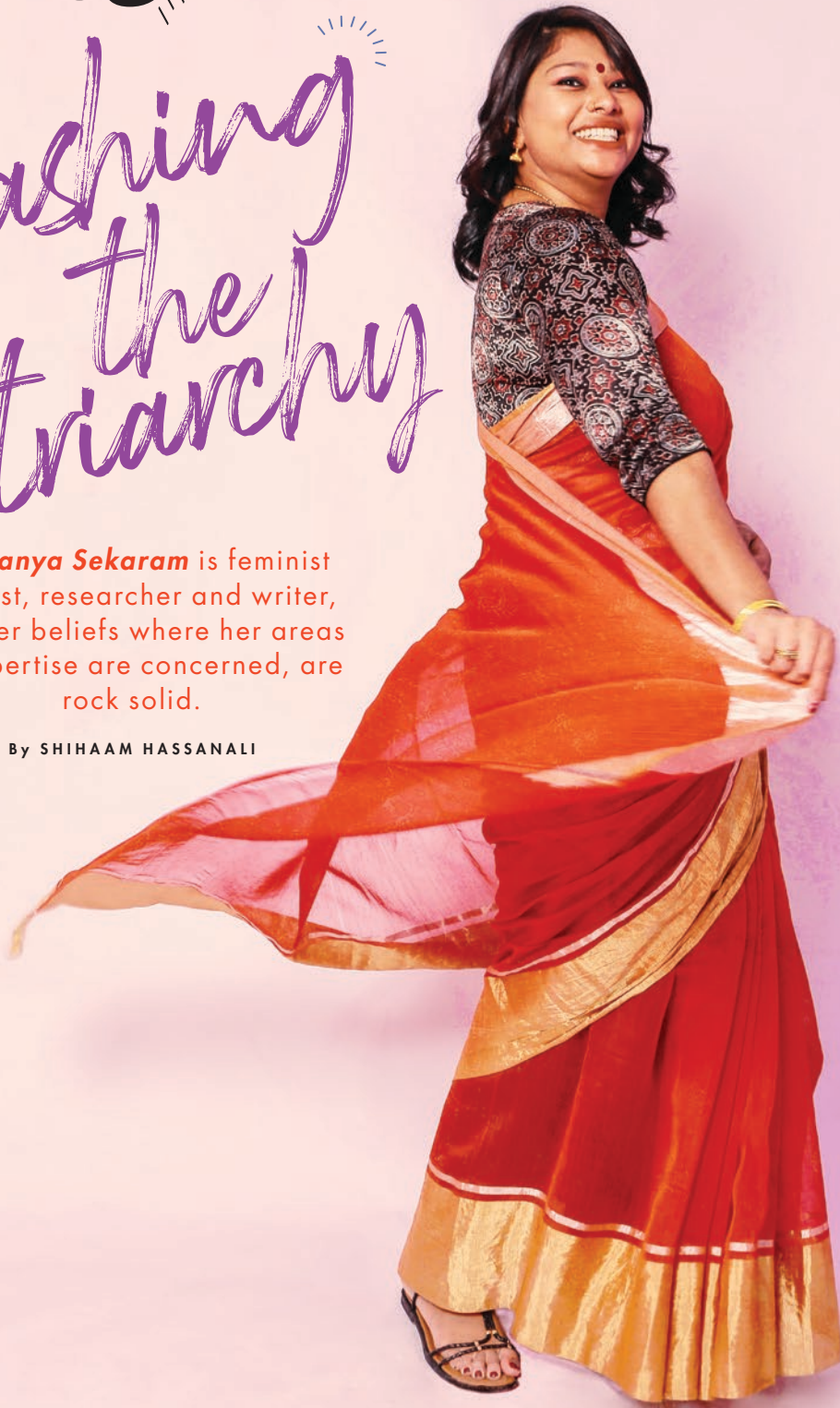
Her new role required her to build strong relationships with universities and professional bodies. "This meant making new students aware about what we do, what careers are available and what you need to do to prepare now to be ready to take on a profession like this," explains Rathnakala. "From creating a good CV to dressing well for interviews to setting time aside to learn additional skills, we get them work-ready, while strengthening our brand. That job paved the way for me to get into lecturing. It helped me divert a lot of energy and, subsequently, allowed me to heal. Here's the thing," Rathnakala tells me. "What I've learned is that no matter what you do, you're going to face dark times, often darker than you expect. You need to put a smile on your face, slap on your lipstick, wear your favourite heels and march forward. Always forward." ☺

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Smashing the patriarchy

Sharanya Sekaram is feminist activist, researcher and writer, and her beliefs where her areas of expertise are concerned, are rock solid.

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI





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"A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," wrote 14-year-old Sharanya Sekaram in a school essay. Sharanya always knew she was a feminist, and it helped to have a family that encouraged conversations. "I've realized this isn't always a thing for others," she reflects. "We talked about politics, the world, in the mornings, the BBC and CNN would be the background noise. So it opened my eyes wider to a possibility of what the world needed to be before I fully understood what that meant."

Growing up, Sharanya wanted to be a journalist and today still finds herself continually working within the media space. We chat about her intriguing background: "I spent a year at the University of Sydney and, on my second week on campus, I joined the Women's Collective," she tells me. "It's a feminist group

committed to anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and intersectional feminism. And it was during that time that it kind of clicked that I could do this for the rest of my life. I joined student politics, I was a left activist (still am!), I contested and was the international student officer briefly. It opened up a world for me." Sharanya finished her LLB in Sri Lanka and joined The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute after which she joined International Alert Sri Lanka, and, in between, did a couple of things like youth activism. It was through this that she got pulled into full-time gender-related work.

We're constantly battling the patriarchy, but as Sharanya rightly points out, it doesn't stand alone. It's a system that works alongside capitalism and other structures — "If you're interrogating the patriarchy, you need to also question cast, class, and religion because they're wound tightly around each other," she explains. "People assume patriarchy stands alone, but like every schoolyard bully, it has a little gang with it."

A study conducted by the UNFPA* showed that one-third of unnatural deaths among women and girls in Sri Lanka was because of death by an

intimate partner. "The reality is women are dying at the hands of the patriarchy. There's incest, female genital mutilation, child marriages, rape, sexual assault, acid attacks, unwanted pregnancies and more," Sharanya ticks off.

Through her activism and her work with Bakamoono, Sharanya has a lot of positive memories to look back on, but when I asked her what the most rewarding part has been about her journey, she tells me it is, without question, other women — the sisterhood and solidarity. "The other is the possibility of a world that many of us don't even know can exist," she says. "I work with women and kids, and if a mother has to breastfeed her kid while on a Skype call, it's not a big deal. Self-care, too, is a part of our work and not an aside to be more productive. When I go for these feminist conventions, it's such a liberating space. Some may be in pyjamas and others with a full face of make-up, but nobody cares. That's not the focus. Every day I see women's groups and feminists building a fresh world. Seeing the possibilities become realities, because they're

putting it down on paper and working hard, is what is rewarding."

There's plenty of confusion around the F-Word, 'feminism', and their idea of what it is very singular. But they can't see it's far more complex. "There's white feminism that women from South Asia or women of colour will not agree with," Sharanya explains. "You also have black feminism which we may not fully relate to because we don't come with that historical background. There's South Asian feminism, socialist feminism, and more. To truly understand feminism, you must embrace that it is complex and that there are different sub-ideas under it. Even as feminists, not all of us agree on the same things. And that's not something you should have to apologise for."

Sharanya wears different hats, but the work she does is the same. When she first started, she tried everything, as you should, but now she's honing in on what she feels she can make the most impact within. "With women's rights, people assume that it's all rights, all the time, everywhere. This is not the case," she says. "I cover sexual and reproduction health and

rights; gender-based violence; storytelling; and the intersection between gender and technology. We need to make the distinction that different people have expertise in subsets of the field. That comes naturally with time. You also learn by just making mistakes."

Over time, Sharanya learned not to take on everything and that you can't be working all the time. At a convention recently, she learned something interesting: "You have your non-negotiables and everything else is a negotiation because that's life," she explains. "Some of my personal non-negotiables are not working for less than I think I'm worth, not travelling back-to-back because I love my family and I want to see them year-round and aligned ethics with whomever I work with or for. Everything else could be negotiable. And I found that shifts your thinking. Suddenly, you're not trying to come up with a routine — you make your life work for you." The bottom line is that you need to figure out what works for you at this point in your life. There's no specific way to do it—just figure it out as you go. ☺

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Making a positive change

Stephanie Siriwardhana, an activist, a singer and an entertainer, is making sure she is completely hands-on

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI





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Stephanie Siriwardhana is hugely passionate — about life, love and family, but also about her work. For the past couple of years, her work in activism has taken her into a setting not many are comfortable discussing: the women's section of the Welikada prison. One of the projects she does every 3 months is to provide care packages for 100 women that include items like pads, underwear, toothbrush, toothpaste, etc. "When I was fundraising for the second year, I noticed that whenever many people heard the words 'prison', 'prisoner' or 'Welikada', they became hostile. I often get asked questions like, 'They deserve to be there so why are you doing this? Why don't you help a children's or elder's home?'" Stephanie tells me. "But they don't know their story. How can you judge someone you've never met?"

Stephanie is well aware of the reality these women have to survive. It's different from our own and hard to understand if you can't put yourself in their shoes. Most of the women imprisoned are just trying to get by. "Imagine this," Stephanie says. "You have two kids, and a husband who is the sole breadwinner of the family, but he's also an alcoholic. So you don't get most of the money he earns and you need to feed your children. What are you going to do? Aren't you ready to do anything for your children?"

Stephanie pauses. "Most of these women need 1,500 rupees to take care of their kids for a week and what's the easiest way to do it? You sell a little packet of something of which you may not know the contents." Stephanie is adamant: drugs are terrible, but with the disparity between the rich and poor and the high cost of living, how are daily-wage earners expected to get by especially when only the man in the family is expected to work? The system needs changing.

A part of her work with the prisons includes donating toys for the children who live with their imprisoned mothers. But it also goes beyond towards fundraising for

infrastructural changes. "Many women have foot fungus because of the poor condition of the toilets," Stephanie explains. "The septic tank was built outside the prison complex and all the gunk goes right past the women's section. So whenever it floods up, they have to wade through sh*t to use the bathroom leading to a variety of skin conditions."

Stephanie also helps young girls who have suffered abuse through Emerge Global. She was initially their brand ambassador and now sits on their advisory board. "Emerge started a reintegration shelter for girls in Colombo," she says. "They have vocational classes, proper counselling and help the girls reintegrate back into society." The girls are in probationary shelters once their court case is finalized. Emerge helps girls within the probationary shelter with therapy, and teaches basic business skills through their Beading To Business program, initiated by Alia Whitney Johnson, founder of Emerge Global. The reintegration center has

programs of 4 months for girls who are upwards of 18-years-old. "In the probationary shelters, some of these girls have been sexually abused and some resulted in pregnancies. They've given birth but since many of the mothers are under 18, their kids are given up for adoption," explains Stephanie. "I once went to the home and I noticed two girls, around the ages of 11 or 12, washing their plates. I overheard one say to the other, 'Once we're done let's go play with the dolls.' The other girl excitedly said, 'Yes, let's!' pauses and then said, 'No, let's first go feed the children and then we'll go and play.' They had kids!" Stephanie exclaims. "And they realized they first need to attend to them before playing. It was heartbreaking." That's when I knew I had to help and started my journey with Emerge Global.

But, this was a rare instance, Stephanie clarifies. When most under-aged mothers give birth, their child is taken away within the first week. "Occasionally it can go up to two weeks but then the separation becomes a little harder," she says. "Some of them are like, 'Listen all I want is my child.' The saddest part is that most of the

“ Stephanie also helps young girls who have suffered abuse through Emerge Global

girls don't even know they've been raped and don't realise what has happened to them. They live in little villages and they see their parents sleeping together and they think this is normal. Later they wonder why their tummy is growing." While important work like what Stephanie and Emerge Global do continues, she knows they're only fixing plasters and not attending to the core problem: "The education system needs to incorporate proper sex-ed, demonstrating the difference between good touch and bad touch, and learning values, principles and boundaries." ☺



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Beauty
beyond
the
surface

Dr Shanika Arsecularatne, Director at Christell Skin Clinic, is revolutionizing the beauty industry and is ready to bash all misconceptions.

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI

FOR THE CHARMINGLY CONFIDENT



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hanika Arsecularatne is no stranger in the medical beauty scene. But, when she first started, cosmetic medicine or cosmetology was unheard of. "I studied medicine," she explains. "And, right after I graduated and completed my internship here, I resigned from the government sector. I planned to venture into cosmetic medicine, which was unheard of at that point."

Shanika believes she's a carbon copy of her mother's energy. Throughout her childhood, she remembers her mom getting off work early to spend the rest of her time with Shanika, even when she did her O/Level and A/Level exams. "I saw her balance her roles and watched her study well into the night, always learning," she reflects. "All this played a huge role in my life and influenced me to pursue cosmetology."

With her expertise, Shanika helps many women and men every day and enjoys doing it. "If I see about a 100 patients a day, 98 of them come because their appearance bothers them psychologically. They're often depressed, bullied, have marital problems, or they don't get equal opportunities," explains Shanika. "For example, some clients tell me that, while they're very educated, when they apply for a job and go for the interview, they lose the spot to a better-looking person. Or, they're hard workers and dedicated, but the prettier one gets the promotion, are more popular or have more friends around them."

Battling social misconceptions and offering scientifically backed information is also a part of what Shanika does. In our culture, we link fair skin to potential suitors for young women and it's no secret that if you took a peek into a matrimony advertisement, you'd often find the requirement for a bride-to-be includes being fair and slim. "Imagine a girl who excels in her studies, is smart and then some," she says. "She is capable and will probably excel in her choice of career, but, you put her through unnecessary trauma because you believe no

potential husband will want her for the colour of her skin. But, genetically, we're not a fair ethnicity group—we're of distinct shades of tan. So my goal is to educate and create awareness on misconceptions related to beauty." Shanika's underlying message, especially with skin, is clear: healthy skin, and not white skin, is beautiful.

Through her Instagram page and Christell Clinic's social media platforms, Shanika has been creating educational content. And, the response has been positive. "I'll get messages from women sharing they've stopped using a particular whitening cream right after they watched my video. They tell me they're seeing the side effects I mentioned, but wonder what they should do next," explains Shanika. "So I guide them with their next steps."

Shanika hopes to make cosmetology more mainstream to allow for a safe platform so everyone understands that improving yourself for you is not a crime. "Believing something will make you look and feel good, is not a sin," she says emphatically. "And

no one should judge you for it." Shanika ensures the consultation and process that follows are unique for each person. So she spends a significant amount of time with each of her clients, first by addressing their fears (which are many, thanks to horror stories on the internet) and explaining the science behind what they require. "If you're trying to make a judgement call, you need to either read scientific journals or listen to an expert," she shares. "If you need marital advice, you'd go to a marriage counsellor, not an auntie or friend because their opinion is subjective."

Next, she talks to them to understand their situations. "I work with some psychologists — in cosmetic medicine, there's a psychological assessment and a body dysmorphia assessment," she explains. "I go through these assessments because, in reality, there are some who aren't happy with themselves no matter what you do. Then, if I feel like the client needs support, I explain that this needs to be a holistic approach, and suggest they talk to the psychologist while I work on the other components. And most people go for it."

“Genetically, we're not a fair ethnicity group—we're of distinct shades of tan”

Shanika's love for medical sciences is obvious. But choosing this line of work was not without its challenges. "When I first started my career, people often made fun of me for venturing into what many perceived as a superficial field," she says. "But I did it anyway because I saw the possibilities and I also knew I wanted a life similar to what my mother enjoyed." She's currently doing her masters, which is the highest level you can get to in cosmetology and will be the first in Sri Lanka to hold this degree. "But, now, people are venturing into this field because they see it's a fun job with countless opportunities to help people." ☺



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The brains behind an untapped industry

Azara Jaleel, Editor of ARTRA magazine gave us an in-depth look at her journey of becoming a household name.

Compiled by
THARUMALEE SILVA

FOR THE CHARMINGLY CONFIDENT



What was the inspiration behind ARTRA?

AJ: Fervent poets gathering to read out their musings at coffee shops, ardent musicians assembling at warehouses to perform their compositions, passionate artists questioning and critiquing worldly ways, capricious writers with imaginative prowess, dramatists with an appetite for experimental theatre and designers who want to make earth a greener place are what inspired ARTRA. In celebrating these formal and informal, tangible and intangible works of art, ARTRA began its journey in 2012 to hail these manifestations that constitute a nation's cultural assets, essential to a community's well being, cultural vitality, sense of identity and heritage.

What were the difficulties you experienced at the inception of ARTRA?

AJ: One of my primary challenges faced when starting ARTRA was making people understand the value art played in our daily lives,

and its richness in creating value for non-art and creative industries. Consequently, although we started our journey of promoting visual, performance, applied and written art through the print medium alone, as years passed by, we overcame this dilemma to a significant extent by

artists are saturated with cultural significance as they celebrate, depict, challenge, innovate and question ways of living

celebrating the richness and stimulus of art. We did this through multiple mediums including online, podcasts, art talks, exhibition, showcases, movie-screenings, gatherings, and partnerships with

professional organizations to reach a larger local and international audience. All this while magnifying the scope of art in impacting larger spheres such as environment, sustainability, community development, living and design.

Being a serious artist in Sri Lanka is extremely difficult due to stereotyping and poor. How do you think this issue can be resolved?

AJ: Education and awareness. Sharing the scope of art in challenging the minds of people and thinking patterns that improve mental and social wellbeing, thereby providing individuals with a greater scope of impact upon the

lives of people and a nation, will highlight the importance of contemporary art. This, in turn, will generate value to the work of artists and that of the industry. Also, I believe in highlighting the worth of a nation's cultural assets in carving its identity and wondrous nature. This will lead to an increase in travel and tourism and will positively impact the growth of the art and creative industries.

Why is it important to build art and creative industries in Sri Lanka, and how do we go about it?

AJ: The significance of art lies in its creation in instilling a sense of emotion within us, as they entrench us with a strong identity of belonging to a country, a tradition or a way of life. Artists are saturated with cultural significance as they celebrate, depict, challenge, innovate and question ways of living, raising a variety of fascinating social, political, spiritual and philosophical questions. So, celebrating these characteristics of art is what ARTRA has taken forth as its single-minded aim. It will be great if

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A nation's growth is not determined by politicians or businessmen but artists and poets

other organizations, collectives and, most importantly, the state also pay heed to the growth of this perspective and industry. As Ananda Coomaraswamy said, "A nation's growth is not determined by politicians or businessmen but artists and poets".

You turned your passion into a profession. What advice do you have for gals out there who lack the courage to do the same?

AJ: Believe in yourself, and go ahead and do it. It'll be a riveting ride where you will face many challenges, and when you do, don't let it steer you away from your vision. Push through, because you will also be rewarded. Finding your purpose will bring great joy to yourself and others, and perhaps the country and the world! ☺



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UNDER 35

Changing the education game

Anitra Perera is all
about striking that
balance with tech

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI

FOR THE BEAUTIFULLY BOLD



W

hat do you want to be when you grow up? This is a question we've all been asked countless times when we were little. For Anitra Perera, despite a family legacy embedded in education, it wasn't as straightforward, at least not initially. "I wanted to be a pilot!" she laughs. "I know, so stereotypical! But it was only after my O'Levels that I realised I wanted to get into education."

Today, Anitra is the Managing Director/Coordinating Principal of Alethea International School & Alethea School, but she had to work her way up the ladder, starting as—believe it or not—an office assistant right after her A'Levels.

Going through the mill had its advantages because Anitra is more invested in her school than ever before. She recently launched a technology-driven educational framework which includes capabilities like smart classrooms and e-libraries. "I noticed the

rise in technology and wanted to bring that into learning, but just enough to ensure the kids don't get lazy!" Anitra explains. "That's when we brought smart boards—it allowed for a good revamp, introducing more tech while still allowing the children to use their writing books."

Change in the education industry is always necessary, and with the outdated government syllabuses and the inevitable shorter attention spans of children, there were no fresh methods of teaching coming in. "We thought this will help the kids retain their interest in learning while still keeping up with the times and moving forward," Anitra says. Naturally, the kids loved the change, the parents got used to it, but her real challenge lay with the teachers. It took a year and half of continuous training before they could roll out the new program to the students. "Some of the older teachers had a harder time adapting, but it was up to me to make sure they didn't feel redundant," explains Anitra. "I let them voice their opinions first, then I set out to meet them halfway by working with them directly."

With changes in how students sit for exams

(bye, written papers!) already starting to take place in the London examining bodies they report to, Anitra's goal is to ensure her students are exam-ready come 2022. "Soon, all assignments and lesson notes will be available on the cloud at the end of each school day. The kids will have access to all the material anywhere!" she says. Not stopping there, Anitra introduced coding and robotics into the curriculum starting from grades 1. "By grade 8, the kids start doing certificate and diploma levels, and take part in university-led competitions," she tells me. "They learn new skills, plus they get to be creative with the projects they work on."

With all the technology Anitra has introduced into her school, it was clear to me she has a passion for it herself. "From the time I was little, I've always had an interest in tech," she confirms. "I distinctly remember my parents saying that although I was a girl, my knowledge on the subject was as good as a boy's. Perplexed, I asked why one would assume boys need to have more tech

knowledge than girls? Why couldn't it be equal? From there my interest in innovation developed."

CSR plays a huge role in both Anitra's life and the school's ethos. Alethea is involved in countless projects, pioneering many, like Mother Sri Lanka—a project under the government where Alethea focused on teaching English to less fortunate government schools in the area, while working with the British Council with Active Citizens Project for Alethea. One of Anitra's personal projects with the National Council for Children & Youth involves the running of 9 orphanages—4 girls and 5 boys. Last year, Anitra was recognised among 3761 applications in 51 countries as the first edupreneur in Sri Lanka, called the International Schools Award. "I had neither no idea my staff nominated me nor how life-changing that moment would be," she ruminates. "My self-confidence grew and I knew I was on the right career path."

As women, I tell Anitra, we tend to forget to take a moment to celebrate the victories.

Echoing this sentiment, Anitra adds, "But we must keep reminding ourselves of our accomplishments, what we could do better and not let anyone say anything to demotivate us. My mom always says, 'You may not get the appreciation you deserve right now, but at the end of the day, you're doing something to help someone else'."

Anitra's schedule keeps her on her toes. Aside from her 7 AM to 4 PM weekly schedule, she balances many other commitments. As someone who valiantly tries to do more in a day, I am in awe. On any given week day, Anitra is involved in the Rotary Club of Colombo, the National Council of Children and Youth, Sri Lanka-UK Society (SLUKS), and the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce. "I also spend lots of time with my dogs, and on weekends I feed street dogs," she says. "I love cooking, too, so I experiment with dishes for family and friends." But, how do you juggle everything I ask. She tells me she owes it all to an incredibly supportive family and staff and does what does because "life is short—you need to do what you love and enjoy it." ☺



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Bringing women together

Yusra Aziz, Founder of Podi Jobs and Co-Founder of WERK is determined to let women tell their stories.

By SHIHAAM HASSANALI

FOR THE CHARMINGLY CONFIDENT



Y

usra Aziz started Podi Jobs, an online platform for freelancers to find work, a few months after she gave birth to her first son. Like many Sri Lankan women, Yusra wanted to take the time to raise her children and left her job in IT at Virtusa after getting married. "But I missed the rush of the corporate world and you find yourself comparing it to doing household chores," she laughs. "I started freelancing for companies overseas because organizations here wanted me to come in at least twice a week which didn't work for me." Yusra was craving more and while she freelanced for foreign startups, she started putting the plans together for her own.

Podi Jobs initially began as a platform for young mothers to find work that they can fit into running a household and children. It started with zero funding and a Google form that went viral. Now, 3 years later,

it is a thriving community of over 2,000 freelancers and includes both men and women. "We are a small team of 3, plus freelance project managers when required, so we had to shut down our social media due to the many requests from freelancers. It's tough to deal with the volume and shortlist them, so we're running with our existing database," she says.

Yusra stepped into uncharted waters because before Podi Jobs there wasn't a freelance platform in Sri Lanka. And, initially, marketing the brand to companies was tough. "We were a group of moms," she explains. "And I'd get silly questions like: 'Where do they find the time to do this?' and 'How do they juggle housework and this?'"

Juggling two startups, 3 kids, a household and everything that goes with the territory is no easy task, but Yusra is doing it. "In between work, my kids and I are sitting in bookshops after school stocking up on their supplies, all the while I'm answering emails or talking to an angry client!" she shares. "But the moment I pick up the phone all hell breaks loose with the kids—it's a lot of shouting and screaming! I used to be embarrassed and apologize for it, but one

time when I used to freelance, I was transcribing an interview that Scooter Braun did (he's Justin Bieber's manager). He told the interviewer: 'Today is the day I look after my son and you're going to hear him in the background. If you're okay with it we

tell your story, post about it. Tag who you want to or who you want to be seen with

can continue or we can reschedule this to another day.' I was in awe and. I took it to heart, practised it and the response was amazing! Many clients said things like, 'We get it, we've been there done that. It's okay, we understand. If you can hear us we can continue.'"

This year, Yusra co-founded WERK

(Women Entrepreneurs Resource Kit) with Amrit Ruparsinghe, an online community for women. With a team of 3, they've amassed over 400 members. Their goal? To bring women together from both the corporate and entrepreneurial spheres to celebrate and support each other, learn from one another and continue to do amazing things. "Women reach

out to tell us they've been looking for something like this and are excited to be a part of it. It's so nice to hear!" enthuses Yusra. "I've never sold tech to ladies and many seem to struggle with it and I'm not sure why. We built a hybrid app, so it's not something you get off the PlayStore or AppStore—you need a link to download it and it takes up very little memory to run. We

want WERK to be a thriving community where Sri Lankan women can reach out to others, learning and benefiting from the many events we aim to have."

For Yusra, it's important you celebrate yourself and toot your own horn once in a while, and social media is a great place to talk about all the cool things you do. "Women are doing incredible things,

but they don't want to talk about it," explains Yusra. "This may stem from our culture where we've been taught to do good work but not speak about it. As such, women struggle with telling their stories. You'll listen to someone else and be in awe of what you hear, then realize you've done cool stuff too and you'll be sad because no one appreciates it. But when you think about it, it's because you've never told your story." Yusra believes tech helps in that area and, while many women are uncomfortable sharing their story and building their brands up, the mindset is changing, especially with younger girls. "It's become their way of life—you need to have a social media presence to get a job, for example. I know the first thing recruiters do is go check your social platforms or Google your name to see what comes up." So what should you do when you do something amazing? Tell your story, Yusra advises. "Post about it. Tag who you want to or who you want to be seen with. Reach out to other women and connect—make your voice heard and build on what you believe in." 🗨️