

Moving Across the Boards

by Ajita Kadirgamar

The role of women the world over has gone through major changes. The days are past when women were confined to home and children, it has been no different in Sri Lanka. Today's Sri Lankan women have emulated their western counterparts and become Leaders and trend setters in the local business scenario. Business Today' talks to a cross section of successful women who have made their mark.

One would have to be severely handicapped (deaf, dumb and blind?) or outrageously chauvinistic not to recognize the fact that urban Sri Lankan women are making it big in business and enterprise these days. And they are making it on their own, despite obstacles such as limited access to capital, sexual discrimination and harassment, unsupportive husbands and the traditional obstacles of having to lead double lives as mothers, wives and homemakers.

Sri Lankan women have for some time now, been venturing into business and becoming entrepreneurs for a variety of reasons. There are those who are born in to business families or have inherited them and are therefore carrying on a tradition while others have had to take over as a result of a husband's death. For some

women it is sheer economic compulsion that pressurizes them into some kind of entrepreneurship. Yet others discover innate talents and feel the urge to develop them while a further category find them- selves with time on their hands once their children have grown up and decide late in life to do something for themselves. Whatever the rea



son or motivation, most women who go into business, excel in their chosen field.

Women have the ability to take a hobby or a craft and from the home itself, turn these talents into a successful business. Those who are born into a successful business. Those who have green fingers take to horticulture and floriculture; those who are good cooks manufacture jams, pickles, numerous food items. or launch into food outlets, pastry shops, and restaurants; the artistically creative ones are into pottery, designing, interiors, soft toys, ornaments, garments, fabrics -the options are limitless. Others use their secretarial or language skills, organizational or public relations abilities to embark on a one woman business.

Whatever the area of interest, the common belief is that because women are ‘born’ managers and inevitably have an instinct for business and need very little prompting to become flourishing entrepreneurs.

Of late many authors and scholars are expressing the sentiment that the world is witnessing the blossoming or coming of age of the business- women in these last stages of the twentieth century, particularly in Asia.

In his massive book Megatrends Asia (Simon and Schuster 1996), one such author John Naisbitt dedicates a thirty page chapter titled ‘From Male Dominance to the Emergence of Women’ to the subject. He states ‘today the world is feeling the impact of an entrepreneurial explosion in Asia and discovering that women are a

critical part of its driving force.”

The author goes on to add though most still live by centuries-old traditions, millions of affluent, professional Asian women will enter the twenty first century as a force the entire world – not to mention Asian men must reckon with. Educated and business minded, they are pioneering new roles in politics, demanding full partnerships with men and playing leading parts in the

…..men who feel stressed at work can look forward to a quiet evening of rest and recreation at home. Women employees more often than not rush back home to take care of the household tasks. They have to balance their energies between these two spheres of activity.” (Kumudini Rosa, Women of South Asia. Gala Academic Press, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1995)



entrepreneurial explosion of the Pacific Rim.”

Sri Lankan women may somewhat lag behind their more advanced counterparts in highly developed countries of Asia Pacific, but statistics such as these should spur women onto achieve higher goals.

- Five out of six new businesses in **Japan** are created by women.
- In **Singapore** 38% of women managers own their own firms and about 20% of business owners are women.
- Women have accounted for one quarter of all business start ups in China since 1978. Some 34% of **china’s** self-employed are women.
- In **Thailand**, women owned businesses are concentrated in agriculture, services, retail and manufacturing.

A good explanation for women’s newly found business motivation comes from **Claire Chang, human research director of the Wah Chang Group and**

former president, Women for Action and Research, Singapore who says, ‘there is nothing like being on your own. I think women will increasingly feel the need to control their life situations, finances and their time. We want it all work and family. We can have it, especially through entrepreneurship.’

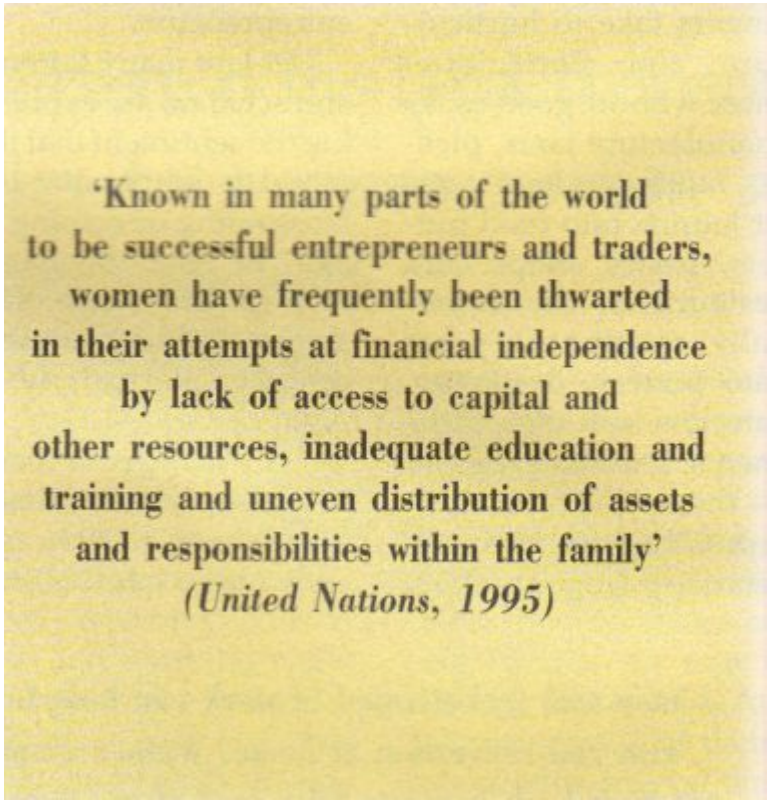
Yet today the very word ‘**empowerment**‘ when applied to women seeking to better their lot, seem to arouse sentiments of all alarm in the male species. Many men Woman, only you can change the world seem to see this threat of women’s ‘power’ in the context of an aggressive feminist approach of taking over the world and putting men down in the process.

It would appear that men, the average home grown, husband variety, resent and fear any success a woman may enjoy when borne out of the fruits of her own labor. Many women have to deal with outright discouragement and a lack of any domestic support from their husbands, which provides a further obstacle to overcome.

This attitude may stem though a deep rooted sense of insecurity in the Asian man that he will be loved and pampered once a woman gets caught up in a career or business of her own with even a hint of financial independence. The fact that along the way a woman’s earnings contribute to a better standard of living for the family unit as a whole, seems to be generally over- looked by public opinion and is definitely not reflected in available labor statistics.

In an article in **Vogue Magazine** (Sept. ’97) Louise Chunn, titled ‘**Men: what are they good for?** some interesting points crop up in the lead paragraph. ‘There is, according to recent stories in the media, a crisis in male confidence. As we tear towards the twenty first century, many men are feeling that the natural order of things-with men in control has been upset. No job is secure, no sperm count assured, no saucy comment exempt from an industrial tribunals scrutiny….. Do men really resent women’s growing equality or is this just a bad patch in an otherwise mutually supportive, largely loving relationship.

Though this article reflects British opinion, the theme is universal and there is a lot of food for thought here! Are men just going through a phase of having to adjust



to new role definitions in male/female relation- ships? Do they judge women's quest for equality as upsetting the 'natural order of things?"

Most women will agree though, that in a still all too chauvinist world, the female species have to work twice as hard as a man to be considered half as good.

Says Lilamani Dias. Benson, managing director, LDB Lintas 'I think you have to work twice as hard to get noticed and to get the promotions at a certain point in your career. Once you have got past that point nobody looks at you and says 'she's a woman so she can't do it.'

Ranee Ratnayeke, chairman A & A International (Opticians), feels that 'women work harder anyway.....but we are capable because we can handle stress better than men.'

Shea Wickremasinghe, director of three companies, and recipient of the Entrepreneur of the Year 1997 Award presented by the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, agrees women have to work. hard 'because you have all these prejudices and really have to prove your point and sometimes it's hard."

Sita Yahampath,managing partner Kandygs and chairperson of the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce feels businesswomen are not taken seriously. 'Even to organize an event it is much more difficult for a women's organization to find money than for a men's. There's an attitude towards women's initiative and that has to change for women to be able to stand up on their own.'

Janaki Gunewardene, president Association of Business and Professional Women feels women have to work not twice as hard but four times as hard. 'We have to be gold, they can be bronze or iron but still go to the top. We have to be plated in gold and perfect in everything."

'I feel very often that males do not give credit to a woman', says **Shiromal Cooray Jayaweera, director Jetwing Hotels and managing director Jetwing Tours.** 'They always attribute a woman's success to some other aspect, not to what it should be either their ability or that they work hard to achieve this position."

Women because of their inherited multifaceted roles have to be particularly good time managers as well in order to succeed in running a business as well as a family. According to **Shirani Dullewa, managing director S & S Interior Projects,** Who runs the Ideal Homes Shops, every second of your day has to be scheduled and programmed. 'Your system Woman, only you can change the world has to be absolutely in order to take stress, tiredness, plus less sleep and more work. You can't have anybody disturbing the system. Your staff, family, children, husband must work for the system, if not it collapses. Now everybody can't do that. In the case of a husband, either he fits in or he fits out!'

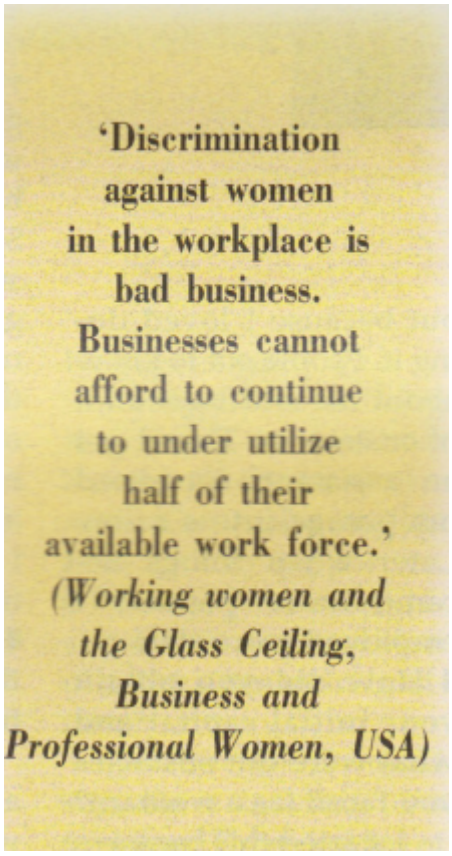
While the country's top self employed businesswomen and entrepreneurs might not be victims, one of the most significant burdens working women have to bear is sexual harassment at the work place and while traveling to and from work. This phenomenon is much more commonplace in Sri one Lanka than would like to believe.

'A large number of women workers are victims sexual harassment at the work place but almost all these events go unrecorded and unreported. The majority of statistical surveys indicate that women feel that outright rejection of these advances would lead to loss of job prospects or the job itself.' **(Daya Jayasinghe on Sexual Harassment, Daily News, June 1996.)**

The types of sexual harassment that occur in this country take the form of

unnecessary physical contact, touching or patting, suggestive/unwelcome remarks, deliberate verbal abuse, leering and suggestive invitations, use of pornographic pictures, demands for sexual favors and physical assault.

The reason men resort to this abhorrent behavior are many and will vary from case to case. But one interesting explanation for this perverted conduct comes from **Kusuma Athukorale, national consultant, Sri Lanka Gender Studies, IIMI** who says ‘another determinant could be the rising



number of women enjoying a measure of economic freedom, while there are thousands of unemployed men in the country. This may ac count for the high incidence of harassment involving young working women, especially in garment factories and in the Free Trade Zone. This indicates an element of economic and sexual frustration among the men.’

The obstacles are stacked against women entrepreneurs succeeding in a rough male dominated business world. Yet those who make it, stay on and prosper. They do so because of sheer guts, determination, competence and the will to succeed.

In the corporate sector the picture is grim and life is not cushy for ambitious women. The ‘glass ceiling’ syndrome is very evident here. Women can only rise so far up the corporate ladder and then being a woman becomes a disqualification. This results in women just getting on with the job at hand and doing it well but not striving for the top job because they know they wouldn’t get it if they tried. Men however, regardless of their abilities or qualifications seem to be able to crawl their way to the top floor.

It would be unfair to put all the blame for the working woman’s woes at the doorstep of ‘man’ kind. Women need to be more accountable for their own lives, achievements and failures.

The lack of unity among women, witnessed at the level of women’s organizations, groups and chambers is a black and sad failing that reflects on women as a productive members of the community.

If more women united in a single effort to achieve their goals and objectives they would be a force to contend with, that no man could ignore.

Ramani Fernando



Hairdresser/Beautician

Ramani Fernando Salons.

by Sharmila Jayasinghe – Niriella

■ How and Why did you get into business?

Soon after I left school, I thought I should get into something creative. It could've been interior decorating, fashion designing or some form of creative work. I started hair dressing by chance. I got married very young. We lived abroad for a while and it was then that I followed courses and worked in a salon.. But I never planned on having a business like this. When I returned to Sri Lanka, I realized the lack of hairdressers, in the country. At that time there was not much demand for hairdressers. specially because females those days were not interested in hair cuts. When I came back, I started training and cutting my friends' hair. This was not to earn money but because I loved doing it. People got to know about me and I got a lot of customers. Then I got an assistant, converted my garage into a salon. Later when things became more popular I employed more staff.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital and what were the obstacles you faced (as a woman)?

I started this business. with my own money. I never applied for a bank loan. My salon was very small at the beginning one chair, one sink, one assistant is what I started with. Then with the money I earned, I bought the products I needed and later expanded my business but at present if someone wants to get into business they have to start with a loan.

■ Did you have your husband's support?

My husband was extremely supportive. He knew I was enjoying my work and supported me throughout. Even now, I should say, he supports me hundred percent.

■ How do you balance a family life with career and business?

When the children were small, I really didn't have problems in looking after them. My salon was at home and my mother and my mother-in-law were also with me, they helped me too. My business was quite small, I had just one salon and I was not very busy, so I never ne- glected my family. But when I started dressing brides it was difficult. Still, I managed with the support that the family gave me. My husband never made a fuss, though I went out at all odd times to dress brides. My family was

always encouraging and I suppose that’s what made my life easy.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

I never came across any problems being a woman in business in a man’s world. Though there are a lot of men in this field at present, I think this was always a female’s job, in this part of the world.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

Even with women in and out of this field I have had no problems. Even if someone is jealous of me I will be the last to know. I don’t have time to bother about what other people think or say I just mind my own business and I am happy doing so.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional support for women who want to venture into business?

I never asked for sup port from the government but I think the government can do a lot to the industry. Years ago, people thought, if you do not succeed in your studies you start a salon or get into hair dressing. But that is not the case. I wish even today, hairdressers are professionals and people would respect the field, and not take it as a joke. Today, anybody can put up a board and start a salon in Sri Lanka. But if you go abroad and want to get into hair- dressing you have to sit for exams and get your license. This is where the government should intervene and have laws governing this industry as well.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

I have not had difficulty with the men who work with me. Maybe. because I am much older than them but, I think if you know your job and what you are doing, they respect you. I think, the males who come into this field are truly talented. You find so many girls joining in to while away time, may be till they get married or till they have a baby, but men get into this field only if they are talented. “

Yolande Aluwihare



Designer,

Managing Director

Yolande Collection

by Sharmila Jayasinghe – Niriella

■ How and why did you get into business?

When my children started schooling, they were boarded. I had a lot of spare time and I didn't have anything to keep myself occupied. I had a friend who used to come to Colombo from Horana to learn batiks. I started assisting her with the batiks she did at home. Then I started painting my husband's shirts. All this I did as a hobby. When we shifted to Colombo, I improved on my standards and started batik wall hangings. A friend who had a shop in Fort, took about 10 to 15 wall hangings to be sold in his shop. They were all sold out very quickly and I had to employ an assistant. Later I got a shop window for my batiks to be displayed at the Oberoi Hotel. At that time I had switched on to garments as well. During the Non Aligned Summit Conference, when all the delegates were staying at the Oberoi, I was asked to do a fashion show. That is the time I entered the real market. One of the delegates, invited me for the International Trade Fair held in Frankfurt in 1974. I got a stall there. I increased my staff and from then onwards I built up my business.

I started fabric painting because at that time so many were doing batiks and I thought I should start something different. I went to Paris, learnt the art of fabric painting, came back and did my creations with a little bit of fabric painting and batik together.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital?

I never applied for a bank loan when started my business. I was scared to get a loan. I used to roll my money, I sold creations my and with the money I got I bought fabric and paints.

■ Did you have your husband’s support?

My husband was in government service. When my business became quite successful he left his job and joined my business. He gave me a lot of support I don’t think I could’ve come up to where I am today, without his support. He is a very broad minded person and never fussed about my traveling alone. At the moment he handles the accounts side of the business.

■ How do you balance a family life with career and business?

When I started the business my children were boarded for their schooling, later both of them went abroad. Now both. are married. So I never had difficulty in handling my family and business together. I got into business because I had a lot of free time. I never neglected my family because of the business.

■ What do you think are the problems women in business face?

It’s not difficult being a woman in business among all the businessmen. The males in this field are very supportive.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

With women, I should say, there is a bit of a problem. There is a lot of jealousy. I think, it’s mainly in Sri Lanka not in other countries. I have worked with business women from other countries. I was quite at home with them. We shared our ideas. They taught me new ways of fabric painting. But if a bunch of Sri Lankan women work together it will definitely end up in a big fight. So that’s why I prefer to work alone.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional. encouragement for women who venture into business?

The shop at the Bandaranaike International Airport, I got with the help of minister Mangala Samaraweera. He knew the quality of my work and thought I deserve it. At the moment I am getting the support of a private American organization.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

I have a lot of males working for me. We work as a team. I have had no problems with them. The man who does the fabric dyeing has been with me from the beginning, almost 20 years. They don’t trouble me because I know my work.

Anusha David Jayarathne



Managing Director

Headlines

by Sharmila Jayasinghe – Niriella

■ How and why did you get into business?

I first started working at the Oberoi as the assistant manager for public relations. The work was very stimulating and interesting. I was just out of university and I enjoyed my work. It was a good grounding because I met a lot of people and was exposed to so many different situations. After a while though, I found it not mentally challenging enough. Once I left the Oberoi I decided to go on my own. I realized that though PR is very much a business on its own. overseas, in Sri Lanka it was just an add-on service. I felt that it was time that the Sri Lankan industry was introduced to a proper public relations service, as a product on its own; not as a mere add-on service. So that's how I got the idea of starting 'Headlines' PR firm. For anything timing is important, for the best of ideas, if you don't put it to work at the correct time it may not succeed. I felt that the time was also right to start my PR firm.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital?

I started with private resources and didn't apply for a bank loan or anything.

■ Did you have your husband's support?

I get tremendous support from my husband. He is working overseas but I can call him any time, day or night if I have a problem. The best of ideas also come from him. He is very pro professional women and in fact he wants me to continue with my studies as well.

■ How do you balance a family life with career and business?

My working hours are really crazy. Some times, I work till about 2- 3 in the morning. But it's very important to strike a balance between the work you do and your family life. If it's only work, you find your work suffers too. You tend to become a very one sided person. So I try very hard to make sure that the other part of my life also functions. I spend time with my family and friends, reading, going for walks everyday, no matter how busy I am. For any one to succeed they should strike a balance. I mean you can't have an excess of one thing.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

I have not had a problem with males. I mean 99.9% of my clients are males. When they realize that you are a professional and you know what you are doing, then you will not have problems. I always tell my clients that they are hiring me because they see the need for a professional service. It’s like going to a doctor or a lawyer or any other professional. If you set the ground rules at the beginning you will not have problems.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

I have not given. thought to the response I get from females. May be it’s because I have not come across problems. I work with females as well and I should say, I’ve always got their encouragement.

What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

I have had no problems with the males who a are working for me. May be because of the kind of people I hire. PR requires lot of patience and tact than any other job. Only people with those qualifications work for me. PR is a very creative thing, so I hire only people who have the quality of creative thinking.

Lilamani Dias Benson



Managing Director

LDB Lintas

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

Actually I stumbled into it. However I think the secret of running a successful business is finding something you really like to do which gives you a high. However that isn’t good enough. You then have to sharpen your skill to such an extent that you can do it better than anyone else. If you can do that, you have something viable. You have both the enthusiasm for it, the talent for it as well as you have a positioning that gives you a certain edge. I worked myself up to the point where I have my own business, which is an international company. I worked in many areas of the business-client service, creative, international accounts and that was very useful. At one given time I was always straddling two or three things. My bosses had a whale of a time because they paid the price of one but got two or three out of it! But at the same time I enjoyed it and thrived and the fact that I did more than one thing was tremendous exposure and experience.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital and what were the obstacles you

faced (as a woman)?

My husband and I put in some of the capital. We are joint venture partners in Sri Lanka. Lintas is the international partner. I didn't have trouble raising capital, because I was fairly well established and had a proven track record. I had more than a reasonable chance of success because I had already run JWT and had proven skills.

■ Did you have your husband's support?

Support from partner was not always there as much as I would have liked, but there wasn't antagonism so I didn't have to cope with that. But the fact that I was more successful maybe than my partner did upset relationships a little bit.

■ How do you balance a family life with career. and business?

You really need to look at yourself and set yourself all kinds of guidelines and you have to manage that situation, as well as you manage your business. When I am asked to talk to young women managers on how to balance career and family, I set them a list of 20 things to do. If you look at it you can do it. There are actual physical things you have to do to run a business and do this juggling act as well. But in the long run a family is enriched by a woman who can manage it. It's a lot more work but a lot more stimulating and exciting.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

There is a glass ceiling, make no mistake. I have experienced it as well. There was an instance when I was told I could not be appointed to a certain post because I was a woman. That person must have eaten his words a million times over, because I just went across to the next agency who appointed me General Manager and I gave that agency such a good run for their money, he must have kicked himself. So yes I have experienced the glass ceiling, also where a man was. promoted over me though he didn't have half of what it takes. But it might also be deliberate, because some people don't want strong people around. I have a completely different attitude. I hate mediocrity and I will surround myself with the best talent available. If I find someone better than I am I will grab that person because I have no hang ups about people who are more talented than I am. I think it's wonderful, whereas most people don't. They see someone with a gleam in their eye and the maverick mentality and they say, watch out this person will run away with my business and

my people. I don’t believe in that. I try to create a working environment that helps my people to fly. The secret of a successful business is, go for the best people.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

I think once you have Woman, only you can change the world got past a certain point, there’s no problem, but getting past that point is tough and sometimes you do experience all kinds of things. I have never experienced it with clients because if you come across as knowing your job people respect you.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

I haven’t had a problem. I think I go out of my way not to be bitchy to women, or maybe I just like the women who are in the business. I have always had quite a decent relationship with the other women who head agencies. Maybe because I grew up in the industry and they’ve been buddies or friends or colleagues at any given point in time. I did have one situation once where I kept clashing with a female client. But it is possible she would have clashed with anyone, she just had a very aggressive personality.

Shiromal Cooray Jayaweera



Managing Director, Jetwing Tours,

Director, Jetwing Hotels,

Vice President of the Association of Group Tour Agencies (AGTA),

Vice President of Travel Agents Association of Sri Lanka (TAASL.)

by Sharmila Jayasinghe – Niriella

■ How and Why did you get into business?

I am a qualified accountant. I didn't want to get in to the travel business. Jetwing is a family concern that was started by my father. I worked in the UK as an accountant and in Sri Lanka I worked for J Walter Thomson for about 5 years. Due to pressure from the family I joined the family business. When I first joined it was relatively small. We had an office in Negombo with a staff of about 20. Now its six years since I started and we have 140 people working here.

■ Did you have your husband's support?

My husband is working for an airline. In that se nse he too is related to the travel trade and very supportive and understanding.

■ How do you balance a family life with career and business?

I have a son. He is ten years old. Some times it's difficult because, I need to travel overseas quite a bit on business and then there are functions that I have to attend, in addition to my day to day work. It's a constant case of telling him, explaining to him the situation and I try to spend what ever time that I have with him so that he doesn't miss out too much. But there are times he asks me why I don't spend time with him like other mothers. But I try very much to spend quality time with him. He is a very understanding boy. His grades at school are also very good. He is not at all a difficult child.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

There is a lot of skepticism from males specially in the travel trade. They would say so and so is very lucky to be in that particular position. I feel very often that males do not give credit to a woman. They always attribute a woman's success to some other aspect not what it should be either their ability or that they worked hard to achieve this position. We work as hard as anybody. But I must say, I have had no difficulty with males, they have given me due recognition.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

I don't know whether it's jealousy but Sri Lankan females feel that because we are business women we are aggressive. Other than that, I have had no problems with females.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement for women who want to venture. into business?

For travel, tourism in general, the government has done a lot. They've taken off some of the taxes. Right now we are asking them to give us a concession to bring vehicles.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

Men react very well to a female boss. There are people working with me who are

elder to me, but they are quite okay with the idea of a female boss.

Janaki Gunewardene



Managing Partner – Ceylon Ceiling

Pearl Property Development

Taos Yacht

Director Ceylon Yacht Charter President Association of Business and Professional Women

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

I think because of my entrepreneurial abilities, I just couldn’t keep quiet at home. I kept going to my husband’s place of business and pulling all his files out and getting into all he was doing and he kept chasing me out of his office. But I somehow managed to involve my- self in his business, which is manufacturing yachts. Later on I diversified into my own business.

How did you obtain your initial capital and what were the obstacles you faced as a woman?

Enormous obstacles. Actually I had no capital at all. I started with Rs. 2000 in my account. Through my husband I met an Englishman who was involved in doing suspended ceilings. In the early 70's no one was doing suspended ceilings and I went around to every architect asking if they would be interested in doing these ceilings for all the new buildings that were coming up. They all put me off, saying it would never come to Sri Lanka. But he and I pursued and when we saw the Grindlays Bank, which had burnt down being rebuilt, we approached them and we got the contract. When I approached the Bank of Ceylon for a loan to do the labor contract for Grindlays, they said no way, you have never been in business, you have been a housewife all your life how can we give you any capital at all? They refused to give me Rs. 5000/-. My associate advanced me the money to be repaid out of the con- tract. So that's how I did my first contract. Next I did the Bank of Ceylon tower, Galadari and Ramada.

From the word go I formed a partnership company with Chiviot Ceilings in Leistershire.

■ Did you have your husband's support?

He didn't say no to me but I can't say he actually encouraged me. He always said no you won't be able to do it, you'll never be a success. Behind my back I felt he was proud of me but to my face he always said you can't do it, how can you handle it.

■ What are the problems. women in business face?

They can never get credit from the banks, it's very difficult. Also when a man looks at a woman who is in business, he sees a woman, not a businesswoman. You can never go for a drink in the evening with a man and come back safely.

■ How do you balance family life with business?

I started working only after my eldest child was 15. Until then I devoted my time entirely to going with the children for elocution, tuition and swim-classes, which was very housewifely. But I enjoyed it because I love the children and I wanted to be with them .

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

Just a few of our women want to get ahead. If you talk to a Singaporean business-

woman and a Sri Lankan, you know we are way behind them, because we are not committed. We think of our families first, our husbands, relatives, everything comes before our business. But for Singaporean or American or Canadian women their business comes first.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement for women who want to venture into business?

No absolutely not. That is the reason we started the Association of Business and Professional Women, so that we can start up a fund to give loans to small rural and urban businesswomen and advise them on how to start, how to market etc. With our excellent network of 125 countries we can help more and more women get into business. And that is the only way we can improve our economy because 55% of the population are women in Sri Lanka. What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power? They don’t like to take orders from women. Most of them hate a female boss. They don’t think women can think. properly, they’re only fit for the kitchen or to produce children. If we manage a home we can definitely manage a business much better than them. Man and woman were created equal and we should be equal partners if we want to progress in life.

Barbara Sansoni



Designer/Chairman

Barefoot

by Sharmila Jayasinghe – Niriella

■ How and why did you get into business?

There is such a thing called a creative person, Who draws, paints, ex- pressing him or her self through some kind of art. It’s not a case of why and how you started drawing or painting. You are born with it. I too am an artist. But how I got into designing for textile, I should say is because of a friend, who was a nun. She believed in the Montessori system of an alternative. way of developing the brain. Not just by reading and writing but also learning in a practical way. There were a group of young girls, at the convent. My friend wanted to teach them to do creative things. But she didn’t want them to do sad things like towels, dish cloths and dusters. She asked me whether I could. design for them so that they would create beautiful things. So I said yes, But though I came from a line of devoted social workers I did not want to become one. I wanted to paint. I am very much interested

in color. To this day I am a designer. Every single piece of fabric you see at Barefoot is designed by us, the yarn dyed by us. All this is hand woven by young women. There is no mass production, a factory system which is boring to the brain. Every thing from our hand bags to our toys are made by one person. People talk and laugh while working. It’s a happy place.

■ Did you have your husband’s support?

I married twice. My first husband died. He was a tennis player. He encouraged me in my work and loved the beautiful things I created. When we found out we were becoming successful I took my name out from the creations and named it Barefoot. That is because we are close to nature. My husband handled the business side of Barefoot and now my sons do. I was always a designer.

■ How do you balance a family life with career and business?

I never worked after 2 o’clock in the afternoon. My children were small and I wanted to be with them. But during the very early time I had to do all the designing and the work related to it by myself. But I had these two marvelous people with me. R M Ekanayake and Rose Jayasinghe. They help me lot. They freed me to do my work. They helped me in what I did not have time to do. I did what I was best in doing. Our agreement was that we were all in this together.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

I have found males to be very kind. They have been kind enough to share their knowledge with me. There was an Englishman who was brought up in the mid part of Britain, where weaving is a tradition. He taught me a lot about weaving. I owe a lot to men for the things I’ve learnt through out my life.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

There are a few men working with me, men are in the minority here but there is no boss worker relationship. They do their own thing.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

Talking about women designers in the same field I should mention Ena de Silva. She and I were in designing at the same time. She is the person I knew from the

beginning. We were intelligent enough to respect each others' talents. I who drew and painted did not try to get into her field of work and she had the same feelings towards my work. She was good at what she did and I at what I did. It's a great thing when you see talent, to respect it. But if sometimes some do copy, it's because they don't have talent. If you are a poet and you write a poem, you wouldn't like to see someone else's. name at the bottom. It is the same with designing.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement for women who want to venture into business?

The Government of Dudley Senanayake gave us enormous support. He was very nice. We had our first show during his government, the show was called 'Saron Ceylon'. But the governments after that did not. show an interest in supporting.

Shea Wickremasinghe MSc



Director Ceylon Biscuits

Director Ritzbury Lanka

Director – Modern Pack Lanka

Entrepreneur of the Year 1997 (FCCISL)

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

My family has a business (Ceylon Biscuits) so it was natural. After I came back from studying I thought I'd give it a try working with my father and subsequently I also started a project on my own (Modern) Pack Lanka), so I got more and more into it. At Ceylon Biscuits I started as Senior Manager and it was five years before I went on the Board.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital and what were the obstacles you faced as a woman?

When I started my own project, we started with a capital base of three and a half million. The other shareholders are a Singaporean partner, my sister and Ceylon Biscuits. We started with a minimum base and got a loan from the NDB. I'm sure it helped to have the Ceylon Biscuits connection. I am quite proud of Modern Pack. From the time it started in 1994 to now it's gone leaps and bounds. We are also exporting so we want to look more into that area.

■ Do you have your husband's support?

Yes. He complains all the time that I am not around, but he's generally OK.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

When you are running a business you have to deal with officials at all different levels and sometimes it is harder because you have to be that much more forceful. Dealing with banks, eventually you have to prove yourself.

We cater to industries mainly and you can never expect payments on time. When you are starting up a business the turnaround of money is very important and when it doesn't come through it's very hard to make ends meet. The first one and a half to two years it was very tough, though now we are OK.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

In my business directly I don't come into contact with a lot of other women but I am a member of the Association of Business and Professional Women so I do meet other women in business.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement women who want to venture into business?

If you are on your own it is quite difficult and not only for women, in general starting up there is very little support given. I think a woman faces double trouble.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

In my own business, the packaging company, I started with very little. There was myself, a clerk and the workers. I learnt every aspect of the business so by the time I recruited people I was very confident of the whole. operation, so I didn't get many obstacles there. But at Ceylon Biscuits for instance one has to shout at little bit louder so to speak. I am also very young comparatively, which is another factor that goes against me.

Janet Balasuriya

Proprietor – Janet Skin Care & Hairdressing Salon,

Janet Academy of Beauty Culture & Hairdressing,

Janet Ayurvedic, Janet Cosmetics

Director – Perera & Silva (Tea Blending) – Balasuriya Management Services (Manpower)

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

At the beginning it was an economic need. I got into business to bring up my four children on my own. I went and learnt under Vidya Kanagatunga, a beautician from India. I was her best student. In 1961 she left and asked me to take over her business, so from that day I haven't looked back. I learnt to make a few cosmetics

from her and after that I went for training to London, the USA, Japan, Paris etc. and I did research on making cosmetics, hair and beauty. I really loved it. My sister got married when she was sixteen; I was eleven and I dressed her as a bride, that was my first bride. My daughter also took to the trade and we started making cosmetics.

I went to Delhi where I met Shahnaz Hussein and she immediately took a liking to me and asked me to get her franchise, which I did and started selling her cosmetics. Later I learnt how to make herbal cosmetics. Then I learnt Ayurveda and now we make ayurveda cosmetics. Today I have a school in hairdressing and beauty culture, three salons and I have a factory with 75 people. We make 52 products and are exporting to Jordan, Kuwait and from December to the Maldives.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital and what were the obstacles you faced as a woman?

My mother was well off so she financed me.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

I have a lot of students who are opening up. What they say is they have a problem finding money to start a business, because to start a hairdressing business you need a lot of money.

■ Did you have your husband’s support?

Yes always. And I have the support of my daughter who is a hairdresser and beautician and my son is in marketing so he does my marketing, that’s why we are doing so well. But I have heard stories where when the woman is doing well the man feels very insecure and jealous and a lot of troubles start.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

I think quite number of Sri Lankan women are in business and doing very well. I don’t think we face the problems most of the other countries face because we have our husband’s support and they help us to do our business. However, women in high positions are not helpful when it comes to getting something done that relates to your business.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement for women who want to go into business?

I don’t think there is enough encouragement.

■ How do males respond to women in positions of power?

They think we need protection and we can’t do things alone. I pretend I need it but I can do everything on my own. When you go places to meet men and discuss business, men are very helpful. But I know there are a lot of women who come to me for consultations who face a lot of harassment. Our men play very dirty with the women.

Ranee Ratnayeke



Chairman

A&A International (Opticians)

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

In my case it was totally because it was a family business, my father pushed me into it.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital and did you face any obstacles as

a woman?

I didn’t, there were no obstacles, since it was a family company. I got capital through a SMI bank loan.

■ Did you have your husband’s support?

Yes definitely because this is our business. He was a government servant and he was always very open to my work.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

In my opinion we have very little discrimination. But the women don’t go prepared. They usually go into business because they are harder, better workers and they understand business better. They are better managers mainly because they manage the house- hold. But they must have a little background knowledge.

■ How do you balance a family life with a career/ business?

It’s very difficult, but with the help of extended family I manage. I think women are capable of handling more stressful multiple roles. At one time I was working and feeding my 2nd baby; I

used to go home feed the child and come back. Probably because it was a family business things were easier for me.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

Very good. I think women must support each other. Though we are not a minority, we are a minority in the working field. If we support each other we are very well off. But I think in villages and among that group their obstacles are not men but women, their own kind. It is due I think to our social background. They think if you send a girl out to work, she loses out on her future marriage prospects and such. If you are married I think your female in laws are the biggest obstacle.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement for women who want to venture into business?

a Yes definitely. If you have done your homework there’s enough encouragement. For woman to start a small business is very easy and they get into it. But when they

go out for credit they find it difficult because they are not ready with their proposals, profiles etc. That's where the obstacle lies, but if that is prepared the doors are open. What happens with a man is usually he seeks this information and gets the proper advice, whereas a woman feels if she goes with an idea she will get it.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

I've had no obstacles. I think if you don't think of it as a man/woman relationship they respect you for what you are, nothing to do with whether you are a woman or a man.

Aban Pestonjee

Chairman/Managing Director

Abans Group of Companies

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

My husband had his own business but I wanted to help him by having an additional income. So I started by buying little things like sewing machines, reconditioning them and selling them at my house. At that time in the 70's there were no imports, so people used to sell their foreign items to me. And I felt the housewife should know there are things in life that can make life easier for them. Things like floor polishers and washing machines, which were then called luxuries were not really luxuries, but I would ease the house- wife's life.

So I put up a little shop in the house and I used to get up at 5 in the morning, run around and see what I could buy and sell in the shop. It was not easy because at that time there were no imports so you couldn't get spare parts. But I used to make sure what I bought was a good item and the customer was not cheated. I used to give a one year guarantee.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital and what were the obstacles you faced as a woman?

I didn’t find any obstacles as a woman in particular. Because I knew what I was buying and selling they (men) were not too happy about it, but at the same time because I was a woman, there were concessions. They thought they wouldn’t cross me too much.

I used to borrow from my husband and father and pay them back. We then bought land in Colpetty and I took a secondary mortgage to put up the building and we decided if the sales were not good we would rent it and at least recover the money. But we did quite well.

I used to have one. over the men because I knew exactly what the needs of the housewife were and I knew all the popular brand names. But at times the principals abroad were not keen on exporting to a small company like ours. I took small bank loans and started getting brands like Hoover, Electrolux etc., and one after the other I got all the agencies I wanted.

■ Did you have your husband’s support?

At the beginning when we started my husband was not at all happy about my doing a business. But afterwards he got to see it was something I was going to do anyway.

■ What do you think are the problems women in business face?

I feel as a woman I get much more recognition in the banks when I speak to them because they know I keep my word. I had a lady at the Bank of Ceylon who supported me quite a bit.

■ How did you balance. family life with business?

It was difficult because I had three children. one after the other with a one year eight months. gap between each of them. So I had a tough time looking after them and the business. But initially I was running most of it from home, then as they grew up I expanded.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

I think the women in Sri Lanka are quite good, in fact some of them are better in business than the men.

■ Is there enough governmental and institutional encouragement for

women who want to venture into business?

No I don’t think there is enough support for women. I was lucky enough but if a woman doesn’t have finances I think she should be able to obtain that finance because I know how hard it was for me even though I used to borrow from my husband and father, which I didn’t like. If she has the ability to do some business she should be encouraged.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

I think they respond very well. I don’t have a problem at all. They look up to me.

Wome Sushila Gunasekara



Proprietor – Supreme Orchid

Partner. Double S. Nurseries

by Sharmila Jayasinghe – Niriella

■ How and why did you get into business?

I started this business about 25 years ago. It was just a home garden at the beginning. I grew orchids and a little foliage here and there. I knew from the beginning that I was good at it and infact people told me I have green fingers. I went abroad and bought better qualities of orchids. No matter how much I spent I always brought back quality plants. I pollinated them. I think my business grew because I was so devoted to it.

We were living on a coconut estate. There were high voltage wires. running over it and we had to cut down all the coconut trees. Then we had no choice but to grow some thing smaller in size. That's how I got in to growing orchids and also at that time the government was encouraging orchid growers.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital?

I started pretty small. I did not apply for a bank loan. I used my pocket money and my private finances for this business.

■ Did you get your husband's support?

Once I started growing orchids after marriage my husband gave me his fullest support. What ever I wanted, the money, raw material, every thing was supplied by him. But at one stage he said, now you are on your feet, carry on alone from here on! with that I got such an encouragement.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

I think most women are doing very well in business. Sri Lanka is governed by a female president, we should be proud of it. There are so many successful women in Sri Lanka. But what ever you are doing you have to know your job, and you have to be very devoted. The present generation is different. The trend is such that all the young people go out in the night, breaking rest every day, and they are too lazy to get up in the morning and go for work. They don't work like us.

■ How do you balance a family life with career and business?

I started my orchid business when the children were still small. It was from the

house to the garden. I was always at home for my children. The children were grown up when I started the shop. Later I opened six more flower shops.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement for women who want to venture into business?

I have not asked for any facilities from the government. I am proud to say that I started on my own and I still stand on my own.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

There are so many men working with me. But because I am knowledgeable, because I know my work I can advice them. They accept what I say. Being a successful businesswoman among all the successful males is not really difficult. I think I am also like a man. I have so much of confidence in myself.

Shirani Dullewa



Managing Director

S&S Interior Projects

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

I come from a business family so business isn't something new. From childhood, being part of that kind of family you automatically get into business. My mother died when I was 17 and there was no one to look after the business as my brothers were studying abroad. So I started to work with my father and little by little learnt the work and became a part of the business circle of the family. I stayed at home for a long time raising a family but I felt my time was not really utilized doing only the housework. So I started little projects to keep myself busy. But it was not enough so I took a shop at Liberty Plaza. That too was not enough. Then this shop (Ideal Home, Galle Face Court) which was formerly the main showroom of Electro plastics (the family business) fell vacant after there was a fire. My father then decided to give this part of the business to me to develop in my own way. I realized there was a lot of potential for interiors.

■ How did you obtain your capital and what were the obstacles you faced as a woman?

When I started on my own I had only what my father had given me as capital and structure. I then obtained a loan from the bank and with that I built up the business. Because of the family background and the assets that I had inherited getting money was not difficult. But as a woman to get into business is very competitive because you compete with about 4-5 men in a project and you are the only woman. They think twice before they give it to you. Can she do it? is always the question.

■ Did you have your husband's support?

He did support me at a certain time when I was not that successful. But the more and more successful I got he became very resentful and disruptive. When I used to go for an important project he would never give his blessing but would discourage me. So I would go for the meeting with absolutely no confidence in myself. And when I come back with the order he would say he knew I would get it. He says he's supporting me but I don't know what he means by that.

■ What do you feel are the problems women in business face?

When you are talking big business with men, you have to accommodate a lot of stress. Women being child bearers can take a lot of pain and stress. And we have to be able to switch on and off from work place to home, children everything. I come from a business family so I have been trained from childhood to take the stress of success and failure in business. On average, I am able to take more than most women.

Most of my competitors are men and the top end of the market. They look at you and say oh it’s another woman! Can she perform? What has she got? Is she there? You have done all your homework and some of the information you have, they don’t. So they get very resentful towards you. Then they get hard on you and try to put obstacles in front of you and hassle you. Finally they feel this woman is tough. What is a woman capable of. Only to go to bed, to have kids, cook, wash and that’s all she’s good for. They have this feeling, whether they are Europeans or Asians, in any part of the world men are the same, they feel very resentful. So they give you these obstacles to jump and they try to sexually abuse you in some form. You keep your moral standards together and they come to another stage where they respect you and help you. And when they start helping you they really help and support you. It’s a hard road but I have got here.

■ How do you balance a family life with business?

Scheduling your time is very important. Every second of the day is scheduled and programmed. You have to get up early morning, you sleep late and less hours. You have to have a regular diet and exercise. Your system has to be absolutely in order to take stress, tiredness plus less sleep and more work. You can’t have anybody disturbing the system. Even the children get used to working to a system. Your staff, family, children, husband must work to a system, if not it collapses. Now, everybody can’t do that. In the case of a husband either he has to fit in or fit out!

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

I haven’t come across a single woman trying to undercut me. Most of the time women have gone through the same problems so they try to help you. I go to a woman seated at the counter, she’s the woman who gives me the facility through the bank, or if it’s a woman I have to take a project from, she’s the one helping me. All the time it has been women helping me.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional encouragement for women to go into business?

Not in this country! All over the world because women have the patience, stress capacity they do a much better job than men. We work long hours and by nature we do a marvelous job on anything we do. But men have this egoistic problem.

■ What has been your experience of men responding to women in positions of power?

You have to become equal to them so you can't be sexually abused. You have to be intelligent above their capacity for them to accept you and look up to you. You have to do something much better than they have ever thought of doing. If you can do that and if you have the determination and don't give up, they look up to you. The three key words are patience, determination and not giving in to sexual abuse.

Sita Yahampath



Managing Partner Kandygs

Chairperson Women's Chamber of Industry

and Commerce President Sri Lanka Assciation of Handloom

Manufacturers and Exporters of Handloom products

by Ajita Kadirgamar

■ How and why did you get into business?

It was casual, just by chance. My husband and I were both government servants, we were not looking out for a business. We had a farm as a sort of hobby, but it was troublesome. We had just given it up when the owner of Hidramani's who also lived in Maharagama, had closed up his handloom factory, said he was looking for someone reliable to do subcontracting. He thought we would be a reliable couple. So we started with ten machines and the attraction was that he gave us the machines, the know-how, his supervisors and workers. We had to weave the raw material.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital and what were the obstacles you faced as a woman?

We only needed a small deposit of some seven or ten thousand rupees and the Standard. Chartered bank gave it to us on our new car. Whatever we earned as profit I invested on yarn and made different types of materials and that was very difficult to market. That was the beginning of our venturing out and also the beginning of our troubles.

■ What do you think are the problems women in business face?

As chairperson of the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WCIC) I feel business- women are not taken seriously. Even to organize an event it is much more. difficult for a women's organization to find money than for a men's organization. There's an attitude. problem towards women's initiative and that has to change for women to be able to stand up on their own.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

As president of the Sri Lanka Handloom Manufacturers and Exporters Association, I have had to be with other women exporters and we have gone out on trade fairs etc. My relationship is cordial and I have not had to face any petty jealousies or anything like that.

■ How do you balance family life with business?

When I started business my youngest child would have been about six. So the children grew up with the business and as they grew up we got them involved with trade fairs, export orders etc. One has become a pilot, one a doctor, one's an accountant so I hope he will take over the administration of the company and one took to designing. The children were with us right along.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional support for women to take to business?

I don't think so. For women in any special way there is no encouragement at all. Women in Sri Lanka contribute very much to the economy but we are contributing at a lower level and at considerable sacrifice to the human being and the family. Women are almost sold in some countries and they sacrifice their whole life for the betterment of their families. Whatever the job, women have to uncomplainingly work, but because of the challenge they do it somehow. I don't think women expect individual recognition. But I find it very disappointing as chairperson of the WCIC we cannot find funding for our events.

Suranganie Gunasingha

Partner/Managing Director

Scan Products

by Sharmila Jayasinghe – Niriella

■ How and why did you get into business?

My husband is the one who insisted that I should start a business. But since I was a teacher I didn't put much thought to it. My husband has a degree in chemistry and I in Botany. So we put our minds together and got into this business. Also since I am a good cook it was a matter of using my talents for the business. At the same time it was something that nobody else had done before. I didn't want to manufacture

jams and cordials and compete with others who were doing it. When I was abroad I saw different kinds of curry pastes in the market. They were mixes of some of the spices you need to cook. one curry. That's how I got the idea of manufacturing an all inclusive curry mix. It's as simple as that. I am the one who came up with an all inclusive curry paste for the Sri Lankan market.

■ How did you obtain your initial capital?

I started my business with just about Rs. 5,000 not in a very big way. It was really a risk because people used only curry powder. Some make it at home, so we didn't know what the market would be for a curry paste. We didn't do a market survey or any research. I didn't apply for a bank loan at the beginning.

■ Did you have your husband's support?

My husband supported me in my business from the start. When we started manufacturing curry pastes we were not sure whether it would. become popular or not. But, I think, together my husband and I embarked on this project at the right time, at a time when domestic helpers are hard to find and husband and wife, both working could spend very little time in the kitchen. This is the ideal product for a busy family.

■ How did you balance a family life with career and business?

I had no problem in managing my family duties. I am a very active person. By the time I started my children were schooling and of course at the beginning I manufactured the curry paste at home in my own kitchen. So I was always there for my kids. Now my children are married. For me, my husband and children always come first. But now that the business is so successful it has overtaken us all and it is keeping everyone busy.

■ What has been your experience of males responding to women in positions of power?

Most of the people who are working for me are females but I do have a few males working with me as well. I have no problem with them because they are well aware of the fact that I know my work.

■ What is your relationship with and opinion of other women in business?

It’s a bit tough being a woman in business. You have more responsibilities. Running the house, looking after the kids. It’s a lot of work. But I like women to come up in business. I think women have a lot of talent and they are capable of achieving their goals. I personally think you should take your work seriously and not start a business just for the fun of it. But at the same time, I should say that there is a lot of jealousy among women. But is it only women? Men also must be feeling the same way about successful men.

■ Is there enough governmental/institutional. encouragement for women who want to venture into business?

On the export side we got a lot of encouragement from the government, with the scheme. which gave us a rebate on non traditional exports. But we do not have that facility anymore. I think there is a lot more to be done to encourage small business people like us.