

WEEKEND FOCUS

Woman-trepreneur

From supermodel to role model, and from researcher to creator of beautiful handmade gift products — these women have broken the glass ceiling multiple times over in the world of startups, which till recently was a men-only domain. They have gone against the tide and are not only afloat but doing swimmingly well.

Abhro Banerjee

profiles a few of these inspiring achievers

What we asked...

- 1 What is the function of your startup?
- 2 As a woman entrepreneur, what hardships did you face?
- 3 Have you ever faced discrimination because of your gender?
- 4 It's a popular notion that the best startups are men-driven. Your take...
- 5 Suggestions for young entrepreneurs



RIA BANERJEE | AGE: 25

STARTUP: CRIAR

1 It makes customized handmade cards and gift items according to the customer's choice and budget. Not only paper craft, but it transforms waste products into beautiful handmade gifts too.

2 In general, the perception is women are suited for specific job-roles like teaching, research and administration. People become more apprehensive when a woman or a girl takes up the challenge of a startup. I also faced the same apprehensions. Leaving a job in teaching sector and giving up a career in research wasn't easy. I never got any support from my family when I decided to float my own startup. Instead, many were critical about the decision but the criticism helped me to go ahead with my dream.

3 In my case, I have not faced any biased decisions from any recruiter. I have not approached any investor yet. I plan to carry on with bootstrapping as long as I can afford to.

4 I don't believe so. People are now waking up to the fact women can equally do well when it comes to entrepreneurship. As it is well-known, Bengal has been lacking in startups for a long time but yes, now the scene is changing in the state. This is why it took so long for woman entrepreneurs to come forward.

5 Youngsters should be open-minded with their thoughts and ideas, be it art-and-culture or any technological innovation. Sometimes, a great idea gets imprisoned in the mind only... Set it free.



SAUMYA SARDA AND SHUBHRA KHEMKA | AGE: 26 AND 50

STARTUP: WELLMAN WACOMA LIMITED

1 It manufactures couplings (devices that connect machinery parts), customized furnaces and other engineering equipment and is currently working with the ministry of defence and major multinational companies.

2 In the beginning there were several issues which seemed almost insurmountable. We were totally new to the business and the subject was particularly technical. We had to research extensively on the subject.

3 For women, it is important to conquer the internal landscape. They must have the self-confidence to believe in what they are doing. Women have always been just as capable as men, no matter what the field. The digital age has brought the world view to our homes and the mindset of families has been transformed.

4 The attitude towards women — be it in the field of education, games or business — has undergone a sea change. All the four corners of the country are dominated by very successful women, so much so that the maximum medals won in this year's Olympic are by women.

5 Every entrepreneur must research before starting up because once you are in it, there is no backing out. There will be numerous issues to impede your progress but more often than not, if you are confident and persistent, they will simply become learning experiences and stepping stones.



USHOSHI SENGUPTA | AGE: 28

STARTUP: TES

1 TES provides educational services and multiple intelligence assessment processes.

2 To be honest, I didn't face much of a hardship. I had some savings as I had a modelling background and had enough funds to start up. You must believe in your own idea. Since I wasn't from a business background, whatever I've learnt, it was on the go. I have always been a risk-taker. That is exactly why I decided to launch the startup. There have not been major setbacks either, because I believe when you really want to do something, the universe makes the avenues. Being a startup, we have seen both ups and downs but we made sure it won't bog us down. Not giving up is the most important idea.

3 The Kolkata startup community is very open to investors. Wherever I've been to, recruiters and investors have been very kind to us. We have had the opportunity to work with KPMG. The way they guided and helped us and the lessons they gave us were incredible.

4 Honestly, it's not about feminism but gender-equality and I truly believe that we are in a century where women are getting equal opportunity. I think things are changing really fast in the startup ecosystem.

5 My only suggestion would be — know yourself, understand what your startup is all about. Know your key strengths. Find out what your core strength is and where you are lagging. It will all come together if you know your strengths well.



PRIYANKA BAJAJ | AGE: 25

STARTUP: MERATIFFIN

1 It is a food 'discovery' app targeted at a clientele that prefers home-like food from their neighbourhood. The app creates a platform for Kolkata-based home cooking service and provides opportunities to home chefs to widen their reach in the city.

2 Boarding the right team was a challenge, identifying the right mentor was hard. A startup is not an easy job, we all know that. I was always told to speed up or stop. Even near and dear ones, who supported me, had a word of caution and always reminded me that there is no stability here. Well, I didn't take their views too personally because I knew they were only partly aware of what I was doing. I will hold on to my passion till the end.

3 Not that I can remember, everybody had nice things to say about my startup. People were supportive.

4 Women starting up is definitely positive, it is getting recognized now because of the success quotient. The more successful women are, more women will start up. Success attracts success.

5 I would advise them to discover and work on their passion for the startup. Their key points should be identifying the main startup problems, define your market well, work out your financial chops, look for the right mentor. And most importantly, get on to the right team and enjoy the ride. Never lose or give up on your confidence.



ESHA CHATTERJEE | AGE: 27

STARTUP: BEE BOOKS

1 Publishing all kinds of non-academic books including coffee-table books.

2 They were similar to most of the startup-related problems, primarily in the area of funding and bootstrapping. As I am in the creative field, and a lot of women rule the publishing industry in India, and getting accepted as the CEO was never an issue. Once we entered commercial distribution nationally, there was some hesitation from the other side to speak openly about finance, returns and percentage. Legal issues are also areas where men in general didn't like discussing with women. That has changed over the years.

3 Not up front. No one has ever given me a reason based on gender issues for rejecting my proposal for funds. I have always found logic in those rejections.

4 People think so because that is what they read in newspapers and books. Women's articles are always separate and are read specifically by women, who want to start something on their own. But to make both men and women read, entrepreneurs should not be categorized as men or women. There is no word as 'man entrepreneur'. There should not be a word as 'woman entrepreneur' either.

5 There is never a right time to start. I am happy that I am working at a time when more women are entering business but there is a long way to go. Dreams have to be bigger.



ANISHA ADITYA | AGE: 23

STARTUP: MARTINI AND MORE

1 It interviews people pursuing different career choices on how they built their lives. It inspires young and budding entrepreneurs as well. It started out with the aim of making documentaries. As we started to acquire clarity about the service, the business model evolved. We are now developing this into an educational model which will be launched in 2017.

2 To be honest, that never hindered me from moving forward. Success is not a cosmic reward. I've always had the conviction that if we set our targets right and know how to hustle smart, the right product will come in place.

3 Fortunately, I have never confronted any such discrimination. If I do, well, I'll be ready to let that pass and move on. When life builds up a wall, construct a door. I call that smooth transition.

4 I am sure the growth is a sign of optimism. Internet and technology are doing a wonderful job to diffuse the disparity between men and women. I think there has never been a better time to be a woman entrepreneur. Mumbai-based crowdfunding platform Wishberry, which is led by two woman co-founders, made it to Red Herring Asia 2016 as one of the top 100 business ventures.

5 If there is something I would want to tell people who plan to start their entrepreneurial journey, it would be to give your 500% every day. Go to work. Show up every day.



SUKRITI AGARWAL | AGE: 24

STARTUP: OUTBOX

1 It is a surprise and experience provider in the City of Joy. We design surprises for people on special occasions and make an ordinary day special for them. From delivering a cake at midnight with a guitarist to planning a finest four-course dining experience in a private yacht — we do everything.

2 When I started Outbox with my partner two years ago, there were barely any woman entrepreneurs from Kolkata. Being a girl, one has to work harder to be taken seriously. But all you need is confidence to prove your passion.

3 I have only faced difficulties in building a support network. Networking helps you make connections and learn the rules. Since Kolkata lacked a good startup ecosystem, woman founders weren't taken seriously. My male co-founder could get the work done much more easily. Some people still see business for women as an expensive hobby.

4 That more woman entrepreneurs are launching startups is a pointer to us being capable individuals to start a business. Kolkata was way behind other cities due to lack of woman role models. Funding continues to be limited for woman entrepreneurs. But the future impact of women entrepreneurs is limitless.

5 Don't conform yourself to a man's idea of what a leader should look like because at the end of the day, if you're successful, no one cares whether you are a man or a woman.



KANIKA SATNALIWALA | AGE: 26

STARTUP: BEMEFIT

1 It is a health and fitness startup. Currently, it is in the process of setting up an offline wellness centre with a fitness studio, spa and health cafe. We started out with the idea of being an online aggregator, helping users discover, engage and connect with their preferred fitness centres and experts.

2 Entrepreneurship is synonymous with the term 'hardship'. We face millions of roadblocks during execution, which were non-existent during ideation. The trick is to make your idea work anyhow.

3 The era of bias is over. The startup ecosystem works based on capability and passion for work. When we started out, the entire startup system here was in its nascent phase. The very first conference we attended was the Nasscom Product Conclave in Kolkata. After that there has been no looking back.

4 Woman entrepreneurs, especially in India, are doing exceptionally well. I attended the Surge Conference in Bengaluru last February and was very pleased to see a number of successful woman founders speak on stage and share their experiences. This shows the acceptance is at a very high level.

5 Just be bold and don't be scared to take risks. Don't look back. Believe in yourself and your idea. Initially, you might face setbacks but things will work out eventually.



SHAHINA AKHTAR | AGE: 26

STARTUP: MISTRILJEE

1 It is an attempt to help people meet their regular needs. The startup helps people book home services such as plumbing, electrician, carpenter, AC services, civil work, home cleaning, landscaping, computer repairing and automobile repairing etc. It's a platform to work in an efficient and a formal market.

2 Today, in spite of being a part of a liberal society, it breaks my heart to say people are still stuck in the old school. The first stepping stone was to boost the confidence level in myself, which would act as the biggest support whenever I felt negative vibes.

3 Yes, I was rejected by a few investors and the reason was not my capability. On the contrary, they said as a woman, it would not be easy to scale up my startup. It is all about your will, and not your gender.

4 Women have started breathing in the world of entrepreneurship with 'recognition' and this happened with the boost to their confidence and self-motivating factor and it is the roadmap for positivity, which will feed the willingness of other woman entrepreneurs.

5 Believe in yourself and your idea but before you start market research. It will help you gauge the real scenario. It will be a guide, depending on the needs of the potential market segment.