

Masala's POWER Women



Finance, corporate management, medicine,
development, fashion, education, media, business—
through the eyes of nine inspiring women



Executive Gatekeeper

Renu Arora says she knows within the first 10 minutes of the interview whether or not the candidate will make it to her shortlist. After a decade in executive recruitment, she is now on track to becoming partner at global search firm Heidrick and Struggles (H&S). When referred to as a headhunter, she says that her work is not just about recruitment, but also strategic planning. After all, it's not easy identifying the best in the business and placing them in the region's Fortune 500 companies.

—REENA KARIM

What are the skills required in your line of work?

Patience and tolerance. Our job is all about multitasking, and we have to be on top of everything. We need to constantly learn in our business and develop ourselves. I am an avid reader and learner. So I try to get involved in Toastmasters [non-profit organisation for development in communication and leadership skills]. I enrol in e-courses on relationship building and on understanding financial statements because it helps to know the lingo when we are speaking to finance directors and CEOs.

Tell us about the talent pool in Thailand.

A lot of Thai companies

are expanding globally, and they are looking for people who will think beyond Thailand. The Thai talent pool is not ready for that. They are good at marketing but lack strategic thinking. Thai education doesn't prepare them for it. Thai people are not mobile either. They are too comfortable here, close to their family. Thai-Indians are the most mobile and aggressive in terms of career progression. Earlier, it was not common to see them in high positions. But now many Indians hold managing director positions in multinational organisations.

How do you choose a candidate?

It is important for me to think

of what the candidate thinks beyond his/her role. That is something that makes or breaks it for me. I have been in this profession for so long that within the first 10 minutes I can tell if the person is going to be a part of my shortlist or not—how visionary are they, how strong are they on their strategy, how involved have they been, the initiatives that they have been a part of and have driven themselves.

What do you think about banker Mervyn Davies' statement that headhunters should bring more women into the boardroom?

In part of our discussion, many companies do state their preference in gender. We are asked to bring in more men than women. In Indonesia, they want us to hire more women. For those who ask for men, I understand where the client is coming from. You need a balance in your team. You need a balanced view. We do push for more women. We do what is available in the market. In Thailand, for example, the finance talent is predominately women.

How can women prepare to take on more challenging roles and top positions?

Communicate that you want to do it. Women sometimes don't do that. They are not very forthcoming; they believe that if [they] work hard enough, people will take notice. It doesn't work that way. The reason men are so successful is because they communicate what they want. Women should do that, too. If you want more challenging roles and responsibilities, step up and ask for it.



Fresh Financier

As a finance major at Pepperdine University in California, **Pawana Koghar** interned at Morgan Stanley and other companies in between semesters, organised charity events, and took up non-profit as a minor to improve her fundraising prowess. She graduated in the midst of the US financial crisis, returned home to Thailand, and landed a job at Phatra Capital, a securities company that has a partnership with Bank of America Merrill Lynch. The 28-year-old newlywed now works 11-hour days as a sales trader—buying and selling stocks and advising dealers for funds.

—AMITHA AMRANAND

How did it feel to graduate during the financial crisis?

I thought that graduating early was going to give me an edge because I would be ahead of my class by six months, but when the financial crisis hit, I was wondering that it was the wrong field to enter because maybe it was the end of the financial industry for a while, but I liked what I learnt.

The finance sector was hated by society during that crisis. Did you find yourself questioning the field you were entering?

The US financial crisis made me realise that I needed to be more thorough in choosing the company I worked for...the company had to represent me as an individual along with [having] a strong sense of integrity. The crisis operated as an aid in helping me find the right company. Phatra sat in the league of a limited few by coming through the crisis without much, if any, discredit to its

name...I've come in at a time where the industry is changing, and there's no better time to make an impact than at a time of change.

What are your professional ideals?

I have come to solidify this vague concept of doing the right thing into a single-word ideology: integrity. No matter what it is I do in this industry, it has to be one that will allow me to walk into my job with pride every day...I aim to always leave personal influences at the office door and work within the confines of the strong set of rules—and exemplify that profitability does not have to come at the negation of regulation.

What are the biggest fears of the people in your field?

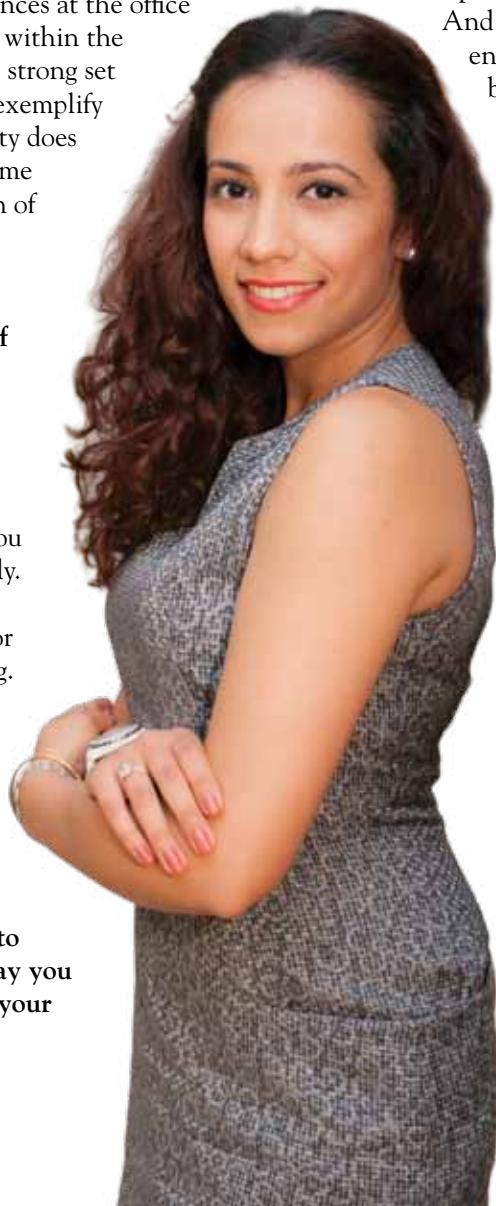
I think the biggest fear in this industry is that it wears you out very quickly. For me, there's no big fear...for now, I'm young. I still have the energy to go for at least another 10 or so years.

Does this job force you to rethink the way you want to build your family?

Definitely. It has crossed my mind—what will happen if the family does grow and if I don't want to work such long hours, but for this job, it's doable. And it's always about being honest with your boss and your colleagues about what you need in order to perform.

Do you see a lot of colleagues going through that?

All the sales on my team, except one, are female. And that's the biggest encouragement I have because all of them have children. Eventually, I want to be a mother. The fact that they can actually do all of this and still have a career for the last 10 to 15 years is a big encouragement to me. If they can do it, so can I.



Mobile Samaritan

Three years ago, computer geek and photographer Pooja Kishnani joined global humanitarian and development organisation Oxfam. She became a part of the Digital Vision pilot programme, whose purpose was to explore ways in which mobile technology could enhance Oxfam's projects around the world. Digital Vision is now an essential part of how Oxfam communicates with the media and its donors. It has also implemented remarkable programmes bringing mobile technology to those in need.

—MRIGAA SETHI

You started at Oxfam with little development experience. How was the learning curve?
It was such a different world because of the language in development. And understanding how much work it takes to build a programme, learning what Oxfam does. There's development work, there's humanitarian work, and then there's campaign work. I still don't understand all of it, but I have a surface-level knowledge of what the programmes' aims are.



What are some things you learnt the first six months?

I didn't understand what gender was until I joined Oxfam. So I asked my colleague. He sat me down and said, "You're born a man or a woman. That's your sex. But as you grow up, there are things that society puts on you." For example, in South Asian countries, you would be a housewife, and the man would go out and make the money. That struck me personally, because I come from a South

Asian family, so I see that it's society that's inflicting those roles on us. I started looking at the media and how that plays a role. It made me more aware of the situation.

How does gender play a role in your programmes?

We did a project in Cambodia called the Pink Phone. Women community leaders needed a way to organise themselves for meetings. We provided them with a small grant. They bought mobile phones [and] asked if the phones could be pink. In the past, they received pink bicycles from another organisation, and

the men didn't want to touch them, because the colour showed that it belonged to women. A lot of times, the control of the household goods will still be in the hands of the men, so this was a way to counter that situation, and the solution came from the women themselves. We got a lot of crap from other feminists, but that was one of our most successful programmes. [It] was replicated in Armenia. It's embedded in our strategy.

Why is mobile technology so exciting?

The developing world actually has more mobile phones than the developed world. It's the biggest distribution platform available to reach women and men. In the past, you'd have to drive a long way to reach them. Now it provides so many opportunities for early warning systems. The opportunities are endless.

How many international trips do you take on average?

In the past six months, I have been on seven trips. Kenya, Nepal, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines...I can't keep track.

You must have it down to an art form now.

I get to the airport an hour early so that I can go and have my coffee at Starbucks, relax before I meet my team, and then get on the plane. I get to the hotel, unpack, contact my partner and my family, relax for a little bit. For the last few months, my bag was always on the floor and half-unpacked.

A Student for Life

Sudha Maroli, Deputy Head of Ruamrudee International School, has spent 30 years as an educator and hasn't lost an ounce of her enthusiasm for teaching—or learning. Having moved to Bangkok in her early 20s, the former BBC journalist got into teaching by accident. Her active charity work around Bangkok got noticed by the school's management, and what started as a temporary stint has culminated in a lifetime of service to the school. —AMRUTA SABNIS

Do you think parents had a problem initially with an Indian teaching their kids?

They might have had reservations, but I didn't hear about it. I'm sure the kids went home and told their parents that I was a very caring person. So eventually, parents began to see that I was a person who would do anything to see their kids succeed.

Which have been the most rewarding experiences in all this time?

There are many, because I care about these kids over and above school-related duties. There was one time when a kid from an illustrious family was struggling to cope with teenage pressures and was beating his mother as a result. I went to their home and stopped him. I hugged him even as he tried to push me roughly, and I said, "You can push me, punch me, hit me, but I'm here because I care." And he's now always telling me that that was a life-changing moment for him.

How did being a teacher shape the mother you are?

Unfortunately, I wasn't the best

mother. I really regret that. There wasn't an elder family member or a parenting guide to turn to. I ignored my children, thinking they were privileged in every way kids can be. We've talked about it, and they don't blame me. But I know now that my children lost out on my attention.

Is it tough to switch off from being an educator?

Yes. When you're very passionate, it's like a high. You want more. Even now, I wake up each day excited, worried, and curious. The upside is that I'm constantly rewarded with kindness and support.

What changes do you anticipate within the education system in the next few years?

ASEAN is going to influence Thailand in a big way, and I'm not sure Thailand is ready. Multilingualism is not a Thai strength, and it's something they will have to look at. Language will be an issue. When I first came here [in the 1980s], it was against the law to teach English!

How do you keep stagnation at bay?

I keep educating myself. I take all kinds of courses and attend conferences. People say, "Sudha! Enough studying now!" The truth is if you want to be a phenomenal educator—because you don't want to be a mediocre teacher—that's what you do.

What's next for you in your personal life?

That's a scary question! I have a

few more years before I retire. I worry about how I will leave because RIS is such an integral part of my life. But my husband and children are in the US, and they need me now. What I do know with certainty is, no matter where I am, a part of me will always be a student. There's no changing that.



Master of Media

Cholaphansa “Hunny” Narula landed a job as a weather reporter for *Newsline* on Channel 11—a show she has been a part of for 14 years—when she was just 22. She also anchors Channel 3’s Thai-language afternoon news programme, Channel 11’s *Thailand Today*, and an English segment on NHK World, also called *Newsline*. She once hosted Thai folk music programme *Luktung Radio* and currently emcees for a wide range of international conferences, festivals, and promotional events. Here’s what she has to say about transitioning between her many roles and her conflicts with censorship. —R.K.

What was your first big story?

The last US presidential election. It was for *Newsline* on Channel 11. For this particular piece, I had to write everything; I had to see photos and every detail, even the subtitles. I was [in the US] for 12 days and was able to produce more than 10 stories. It was the first time that I went out on my own to find interviewees. Also, shooting in America isn’t as easy as it is in Thailand. You require permission to shoot on the side of the road.

How do you transition between hard news and entertainment?

It hasn’t been that difficult transitioning from one job to another. I think I just have the flair to be able to present anything. It has been an advantage for me. If you [project] to be an expert on one subject, then

your job boundaries are narrow. For me, I can play any role. I could host an international conference [with Thai and foreign dignitaries] or cover something local like shrimp [disease].

Are you seen as less serious when you do entertainment news?

Not at all. I get a chance to learn more about various [subjects]. Through [emceeing at] events, I get to see things and know things that I have not seen or known before.



How do you deal with media censorship in Thailand?

You have to be very careful. There is a fine line, and you could lose your job. I tend to present the facts and the truth. I don’t try to give my opinions or be critical because my opinions can be biased and could mislead the audience. If you want to be in the industry, it is always best not to take sides.

What is your favourite part about being a journalist?

I get to know what is happening around me when I speak to people who are in other industries. Things that might be relevant to their lives—for instance, oil prices going up and down, gold, or some diseases. It’s the thrill of knowing and sharing.

Which of your roles are you most comfortable in?

I love hosting events because I get to do a variety of things. I don’t like being in front of [an audience], but after an event, when people come up to you and say you did a good job, it gives you a feeling of accomplishment and the momentum to [keep going].

Have there been any benefits being half Indian?

Being half Indian has given me a lot of opportunities. I don’t look too Thai and not too *farang*, so it’s a good balance. In the media industry, looks matter. And then [whether] you are able to deliver, that’s the second important thing, which should [ideally] be the first.

Material Girl

Bangkok-born **Sivy Srichawla** is petite and soft-spoken, but once she begins talking about her company, her passion is evident. Sivy and her sister Sonia forayed into Bangkok's fashion world nearly a decade ago with the creation of Kyra Mode Company Limited, a fashion lingerie producer in Thailand that also distributes the Playboy lingerie line. Kyra now has 50 outlets across the country, with two standalone locations in Bangkok.
—A.S.

How was Kyra born?

Kyra is an extension of the family business. My dad started a textiles business, like lace and fabrics to do with innerwear mostly. I knew it was something I wanted to be part of. So I graduated in marketing, got married, and later my sister Sonia and I started the company in 2004.

Who inspired you to form this company?

The biggest inspiration in my life is my father. He built his own company and told us many stories about how hard it was for him. He believes Indian women have as much right to be part of the business world as men. He showed us how difficult it was to make money and how much effort and time you have to put in.

What challenges did you face in the initial years?

Business-wise, it was really tough to get people to accept the brand. I was young, and nobody was sure if I was in this for real or doing it for fun. I went to stores all by myself and literally almost begged at one point. But I was able to persevere and prove

that we were special. And, of course, managing family and kids was part of the challenge, because I got married very young, at just 19!

How did you make it work?

Both families have been very understanding and supportive. My husband is my biggest supporter and my sounding board. We talk a lot about business and always throw out ideas for each other. He's always there to comfort and listen to me. I had my daughter at the same time as when the brand was launched, and then my son was born around the time I started the factory. It was a very tiring phase, but I made it through. It's chaotic at times, but my sister helps me out in a lot of areas and that gives me more time.

Who inspires you within the fashion world?

I really like Chantal Thomas. She's a daring yet sophisticated lingerie designer —very boudoir.

What are the things women need to know about lingerie?

Most customers don't even know their bra size. They should come in and get fitted for the right size. Another thing I tell women is that no bra should be used

for more than six months. And lastly, always trust in the Asian brands. People like to own Victoria's Secret stuff, but it's made for a different body type.

What is your advice to women entrepreneurs?

You know, I still don't consider myself successful really. I'd say you have to think outside the box and show your commitment.

Finding the balance between home and work is also important.



Culinary Conqueror

Vinder Balbir has been in the food business since she was 16. After three years of conducting cooking classes at home, she opened a six-table Mrs Balbir's down a lane off Sukhumvit Soi 11. Today, there are seven Mrs Balbir's outlets across Bangkok, six of them in malls and food courts, and Vinder has even created menus for Thai Airways. For 16 years, she has hosted and produced her own travelling and food shows on cable networks. Next year, Vinder plans to open three more branches of Mrs Balbir's. —A.A.

You started working at 16. You didn't want to go to college?

My parents died when I was 10. Both of them were killed in a riot in Malaysia. Then I was sent to boarding school [Italian Catholic convent in Malaysia]. [After] I passed my Senior Cambridge examination, my grandfather and my uncle got me married to a gentleman who lived in Thailand. And his name is Balbir.

What was it like moving to Thailand?

I was so excited. I

was happy. I just got married, and I said, I want to start a new life. The best part was I married a man who supported me. Because he was kind and supportive, I told him I'd use his name. And I said, "If I don't behave, you can remove the s, so it becomes Mr Balbir's."

How did the idea of the restaurant come about?

I felt the urge to cook from the age of six. In the convent, the nuns taught me to make pizza and cheesecake and black forest cake. When I married, my husband could only eat Indian food, so I had to learn. And he kind of trained me. Then I started teaching at home to Indian women my age. I would teach them how to make pizza and ice cream cake.

What was the restaurant scene like when you started out?

When I started, it was very difficult because Thais could not eat Indian food. I had to really rely on the Indians. [But] they would only eat out on Sundays. Then I had to rely on the British,

but there wasn't a big British [community] here.

How did your business grow?

I had to teach and educate people about Indian food with my cooking classes. And when I had Thai students, they started trusting what I put into my food and how clean we are and how safe it is to eat Indian food.

How was working when you were starting your family?

I had my first baby when I was 21. I had three children, and I lost two. I worked all through pregnancy and everything. I never allowed myself to have excuses. There was a lot of emotional pain [when I lost my children]...[but] I never stopped because I felt that there was no need to feel sorry for myself.

What are the challenges of expansion?

It was quite easy. My son joined the business. He's very good in design. So that helped a lot. I'm very blessed with good staff. [They] have been working for me for many years. I got the support of my head chef who's been with me 13 years.

How do you keep your employees with you for so long?

I take good care of them because [they] take care of my business. The most important thing is they [are] happy. Every time there's an issue, we get together and discuss [it]. Everybody helps each other. Now when they have a problem, they're not afraid to come forward.



Teacher of Thinkers

Laxmi Dangmaneerat quit a cushy job as a research analyst to establish International School of Chonburi. In a world where even the smallest children are pitted against each other in pursuit of excellence, Laxmi emphasises the need to allow kids to become thinkers. —A.S.

How and when was the school founded?

I moved to Pattaya after marriage, and when I was pregnant with my son, I wondered where my child would go to school. That's when I decided to open a school based on my ideology, which at that time I found the area lacked. So we used money that my husband and I had saved up from previous jobs. No banks, no parents. And after a lot of struggle, we founded the school in 2008.

What kind of training did you have?

I graduated in businesss, but for my first job, I applied for the role of teacher's assistant at Early Learning Centre, an international kindergarten in Bangkok. I realised that this is what I wanted to do. That's when I pursued my master's degree in education in the area of curriculum and instruction. After that I trained at the Helen Doron Early English Learning Centre, and initially I had decided I would manage a Helen Doron franchise. But I got the opportunity to open my own school, and I seized the chance.

What is this ideology that you feel so strongly about?

It is the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, developed by Loris

Malaguzzi, a teacher in Italy. It's focused on preschool and primary education. The belief is that the environment is the real teacher of a child and that teachers exist to facilitate the process of learning through play, discovery, and dialogue. There's something very wrong with the system if little kids are sitting quietly at their desks working on some sheet at the age of three.

What do parents need to understand about their kids?

That children progress at different paces. Don't push them too hard. And if your kid asks you why it's raining, don't launch into a scientific explanation. Ask them what they think. And they will come up with random thoughts, but that's what you want. You want the kids to think! Engage your kids in two-way interactions, like board games. No child will resist that.

Where do you draw the line between being a teacher and becoming their parent?

I've learnt that the hard way. Sometimes I want to step in when I see a parent do something I don't think is good for the child, but I can't. For example, some parents send very unhealthy snacks with their kids, which are really not

good for them. But I can only advise. What they do next is up to them.

What have you learnt from the whole experience?

That competition can get aggressive. When we started, we didn't want to compete with the big schools. But they began giving discounts and tried to poach kids. Also, I've realised that patronage is transient. People who choose your school today might not do so tomorrow. But the kids make all this worthwhile. On my birthday, they gave me a card, and I must have gotten 80 little hugs. They're always telling me they love me and my class. That's the reason I'm in this field.

What does the future look like?

I started the school with two kindergarten kids: my son and niece.

We are now up to second grade. For now, the plan is to expand to fifth grade. It's slow and definitely steady.



Magic Medicine

Dr. Anjana Sachabudhawong has been a pediatrician at Samitivej Hospital for almost seven years. The Chulalongkorn-educated doctor is also qualified in pediatric pulmonary and critical care. Emergencies can sometimes force her to clear her schedule, but Anjana is devoted to her patients and has a sweet bedside manner with the little ones. She also maintains a blog, Happy Healthy Children, about common child development questions, to supplement her care. —M.S.

What's it like giving kids their dreaded injections?

I have to calm parents more than babies, and make sure that they understand that the baby is going to cry. So if parents are prepared for that, it goes smoothly. As children get older, I have little tricks. "This is a magic medicine to keep you strong." Maybe they cry a little bit, but after four or five years old, they're ok. They say, "I know it's painful, but I will sit for you, and I will get that injection."

As a pediatrician, it must be like having two patients—the parent and the child.

One of our very senior professors told us, "In this field, you're not just taking care of kids. You're actually taking care more of parents, so both have to come together." I've always included that into my practice. It's very important that parents understand what's going on.

What kinds of critical cases do you see most?

Most of the time, I deal with drowning. Every condo around here has a swimming pool, and it's very high risk for kids to drown. Kids love water. But if they go unsupervised or if there's a minor incident in the swimming pool, they can drown very easily.

Is it hard to have a professional distance with children?

A couple of months ago, I was seeing a patient for the first time. They were Orthodox Jews, and on Fridays they couldn't leave the house at all. On



Thursday, the father got the child in, and the child was struggling to breathe. And I begged him to hospitalise. It took me an hour to negotiate, and eventually, I got the family to stay until the very last minute of Thursday evening, till about midnight. It's tough, but you have to go to a certain length, and then you have to give up.

What common misconceptions do parents have these days?

The debate about vaccinations has started to creep into Indian society. The first debate was about linking vaccinations to autism, but now there's talk of something that used to be the case 70 years ago—there were certain minerals in the vaccine that turned out to be bad for the patient. But even before I was born, that was changed. The other recent issue is the influenza vaccine. Some parents feel, *Let them have influenza*. But five in a hundred cases could be very critical. The vaccination is the only preventative care I can offer. The cost of [having a baby in the hospital with influenza] is a hundredfold.

But are there instances where you feel kids are overmedicated?

When I don't see evidence of bacterial infection, I take the time to discuss this with parents. And what I'm dealing with these days are parents who want antibiotics right away. They don't give a second to think about what antibiotics do to our body. It kills the good bacteria in the body as well, and to restore that, it takes a month, three months. Then there are parents who are anti antibiotics, but that also makes my practice challenging. I can see pus on their child's tonsils, but they say, "Can we wait, doctor?"