



## IMPACT STORY

# WOMEN INNOVATORS CREATE SOLUTIONS TO STEM COVID-19 IN INDIA

Photo: UN Women/Sanjeeth Seetharam, Yashwant Rao, Deepa Alex

Women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic's social isolation and economic fallout. They face increased violence, unpaid care work, and other inequalities and violations of their rights.

As a response to the crisis, in India, UN Women's WeEmpowerAsia programme and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology's MyGov initiative teamed up to organize the Shri Shakti ("female power") Challenge. The aim was to bring women innovators to the forefront of recovery efforts and to equip them with tools to turn the challenges of the coronavirus into opportunities. The challenge kicked off in April 2020, drawing close to 1,300 entries from Indian female entrepreneurs, scientists, and change-makers to stem COVID-19. After a six-month screening, the winners were awarded INR 500,000 each. In addition, three teams in the "Promising Solutions" category were awarded INR 200,000, and 11 finalists were awarded INR 75,000.

As these testimonies from the top three winners demonstrate, when guaranteed equal opportunity, choice and access to resources, women's full participation and leadership benefits society as a whole.

**Dr. Anushka Ashokan** and **Dr. Anjana Ramkumar** from Thanmatra Innovations were wary of being infected with COVID-19 because as health-care professionals they

worked with numerous patients every day. They also noted that most of the masks sold were disposable and unaffordable to many. Taking this into account, they created an antimicrobial solution that could be sprayed on handkerchiefs or *dupattas* (long scarves). Their innovation is scalable to remote areas of the country as any piece of cloth can be turned into an antiviral mask within minutes by simply spraying the solution and letting it dry. It is a simple and affordable product that also reduces the environmental waste created by disposable masks. With the mentorship received as part of the Shri Shakti Challenge, Ashokan and Ramkumar plan to scale up their invention, increasing marketing and antimicrobial testing.

## PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

UN Women has teamed up with the **European Union** to establish **WeEmpowerAsia**, a programme that focuses on increasing female participation in business and leadership in China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam.

Cash awards to the top six teams and 11 finalists of the Shri Shakti Challenge were funded through the **European Union** (INR 2,550,000) and UN Women's **regular resources** (INR 375,000), which contributed close to **13%** towards this project.

**Photo above:** From left, Dr. P. Gayatri Hela, Romita Ghosh, Dr. Anjana Ramkumar and Dr. Anushka Ashokan

**Romita Ghosh's** start-up iHeal HealthTech created a UV sterilization cabinet that enables personal protective equipment, including masks and other disposables, to be safely reused at 99.9 per cent efficiency. The reuse of such items, even after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, will not only be cost-beneficial for many sectors, especially hospitals, but will also reduce biomedical waste and its consequences. "My aim going forward is to make sustainable medical equipment available and accessible to everyone globally, and I'm glad I was able to be a part of moving towards a coronavirus-free world," said Ghosh. She also expressed her hope that the next generation of innovators focus on "human-centric designs" that are user-friendly and cost-effective.

**"The more we open up to what women leaders and change-makers can bring to the table, the better our ideas and solutions in times of crises."**

—**NISHTHA SATYAM**, *UN Women Deputy Country Representative, India*

**Dr. P. Gayatri Hela** is a chemical scientist and Managing Director of Reseda Lifesciences, a company that makes chemical-free and plant-based products to fend off germs in homes and pests in agriculture. Through her research, including during the 2003 SARS epidemic, Dr. Hela has found that excessive use of alcoholic sanitizers leads to an eventual reduction in immunity. Her solution for the Shri Shakti Challenge was a non-alcoholic hand sanitizer using plant extracts, which she had launched in 2018.

"When I won the initial prize of INR 75,000, we could finally test our product on 600 participants. We found that not only does it sanitize, but it also has various other benefits such as a boost in immunity and helping with rashes." Moving forward, Dr. Hela plans for her company to become a brand that is known globally for authentic and safe products. She is also working on developing a sustainable way to source raw material from farmers while supporting their livelihoods. "I hope that I have been a part in getting us to move forward to a time that's healthier and safer for all," she concluded.

WeEmpowerAsia provided the finalists with mentoring by experts from India's National Association of Software and Service Companies to help them develop their ideas into effective solutions. The finalists attended eight sessions on topics including financial and business modelling, legal certification, marketing, product design and pitching.

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

Driving change in the workplace, marketplace and community

WeEmpowerAsia promotes the **Women's Empowerment Principles** (WEPs) established by the UN Global Compact and UN Women. The set of principles—**leadership, equality, safety, transparency, community, markets, learning**—offer guidance to businesses on how to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace and community.

To date, WeEmpowerAsia (2019-2022) has allocated **EUR 8 million** to promote the **WEPs**:




- Across **7** countries in Asia;
- Activating **700** companies;
- Catalyzing **700** women entrepreneurs;
- Impacting **700,000** people (employees, consumers and entrepreneurs);
- Mobilizing **70** influencers; and
- Contributing to at least **7** policy dialogues in the region.

In **India**, the project's efforts around the WEPs has increased the country's signatories to **171** companies who are committed to the empowerment of women.

For more information, visit [What is WeEmpowerAsia?](#)

"The more we open up to what women leaders and change-makers can bring to the table, the better our ideas and solutions in times of crises," said Nishtha Satyam, UN Women Deputy Country Representative in India. "Women's agile adaptation under challenging circumstances brings transformative impacts. Their innovations will not only improve how we tackle COVID-19 but are also key to our sustainability and resilience."

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