



VAAHINI CONNECT PODCAST|SEASON 2| EPISODE 1 HOW UZMA BROKE THE CYCLE OF POVERTY, ONE NAPKIN AT A TIME AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to the Accenture Vaahini Connect podcast. In Season Two, 'Meet the luminaries', we bring to you the unique stories of women luminaries who share how we can all play a role in furthering big goals that impact societies.

Whether you are a salaried employee, an entrepreneur, a student, or just someone looking for a way to contribute to society, in each episode, we hope to bring to you inspiring stories and effective ways on how each one of us in our powers can make this world a better place for all.

I'm Savitha Nanjappa, Success Coach, Founder of Success with Savitha & your Podcast Host. In this episode, we meet Suhani Jalota, the Founder and CEO of Myna Mahila Foundation which empowers underprivileged women in Mumbai to develop sources of income, livelihood, and dignity through progressive actions of impact such as making and selling sanitary napkins.

Let's hear from Suhani, how to support women from marginalized backgrounds thrive and close the income gap, and how we can all stand by initiatives that help such women have consistent incomes and dignified work.

Hi, Suhani, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for joining us today. I'm looking forward to our conversation. And I am excited about what is going to unfold in our conversation together. Welcome aboard.

Thanks so much, Savitha. Really excited to be a part of this and to speak to you today.

So, on that note, diving right in, I want to go right to the Start. Myna Mahila Foundation has been instrumental in transforming the lives and livelihood of women and has initiated several meaningful forthcoming dialogues on female health and hygiene. What inspired you to address and initiate



**progressive changes in this direction?
What's that story? What's that incident?
What was your starting point for this
journey?**

This is a great question. I think, Myna Mahila Foundation, since the time we started, we've always wondered, what was that one story that really prompted us because it really was a collection.

I think that at the time I met the women who changed my life, I was 15. These are slum community leaders—Parveen, Meena, Malathi Amrey—these women were community leaders at a time and at a place where it was completely unusual, and just, they had experienced so much suffering together. These women had seen their children die on the railway tracks where they used to live, they never had toilets, and they were married off when they were children. They were domestically abused for decades. And story after story, we would hear of just somehow, women being oppressed and women not being able to speak up. And yet, some women, like these leaders, are coming out of all of that and somehow standing up for their own rights and wanting to help others go through the same.

So, Myna Mahila was really more of a movement and a concept when we were thinking about it was just how can we get the kind of energy that these slum leaders had to everybody? En masse, how can we enlighten or make women learn why they should speak up and how they should speak up in front of everybody? So that's really what we were trying to do. Then we just held lots of discussions with all kinds of women, young girls to young, unmarried women to older women. And the menopausal women and grandmothers and mothers-in-law all having discussions around 'what makes you feel more empowered?', 'what makes you want to speak up?', 'when are you most proud of yourselves?'

In conversations, the kinds of things that came up—women will often say things like 'when we make something—when we make something in a kitchen'; they are proud of it because that's the kind of sphere that they're restricted to at home. But now, what if we broaden the kinds of things that they could make? Maybe they would start to dream and think differently, maybe the physical output would make them feel proud of themselves in a different way.

Then, over time, we morphed, and we started to create these products that we were like, "Okay, let's create products then," and women should make these things. But, now, what should we be making? We should be making products that other women would feel proud of as well. So, we actually, purposely went to choose a generally taboo and stigmatized product and a topic which was sanitary napkins, such that it would start conversations from, by women in the communities, who are a little bit more, had more agency than others. And, it would get them to start having conversations with those who needed that sense of agency. So, these women would make these products, then also go door to door and have lots of conversations with their neighbors, their relatives, their friends, and people even in other unknown communities, and start to explain to them their story.

Myna was prompted as a movement of 'how can we make women speak up' and Myna is the bird that speaks a lot like 'Thotha', 'Myna'. So, women would often say that "you're like a Thotha, Myna. And I was like, that's precisely, what we want every woman to be like, we want them to talk about the issues they're most afraid to discuss and talk a lot about them because that will get them to really speak up.

I was going to ask you why you chose Myna, and you shared that. So, thank you for sharing that story. My next question to you is about what has been your biggest struggle and challenge in helping women become financially independent.

Yeah, oh my God, so many. So, I think there are three main constraints that women experience when they're trying to join the labor force; or once they're in the labor force, and they're planning whether or not to stay or leave. The first is internal constraints. So, are they even motivated to work? Do they even think that they can do it? "So am I? Do I have the capacity or the capability to do it or not?" So, women often tend to question themselves, and that may also in some ways, be a huge barrier to, is household-level constraints. These are household permissions, whether or not she's



allowed to work, whether or not, whether the woman has time, given her household responsibilities or children-related responsibilities to be able to work. And then, the third is external constraints that have to do with 'Are there jobs available for her? Are there suitable opportunities available for her, that are near home, maybe more dignified, that are acceptable by their families as well? How do they find such jobs?' So, I think that considering all different types of constraints, I think it's the combination of a few of these that make it impossible for women to work in many setups, and children—I think so, I mean, married women in India, we have a labor force participation rate of about 17%. This is in urban areas; considering rural, it's about 23% or so, slightly higher because of agricultural, agricultural employment. But in urban areas, there's a stagnation that we're finding in employment.

Through Myna's work as well, I think we struggled a lot to figure out how we provide employment to women that are not sitting down in one place. For instance, I'll give you an example. So essentially, we have lots of job openings for women to do distribution type of work, where you go door to door, providing sanitary napkin products, but also when you're providing health education to women at the doorstep. Now, this involves you talking to strangers; this involves a lot of hard work, physical hard work, where you have to travel up and down buildings up and down lanes, maybe go to unknown territories. Maybe it's slightly unsafe, somewhere, it could be quite unsafe in other places. It's scorching hot. Women are not allowed, in most cases, to do such type of work. So, we've had cases and times when we have actually spent about two, three weeks trying to recruit women, we'd gotten 100 women together in one room; they start, then they do the sales training, and the health education training and so on, and then they start going to the doorstep. And within a week, we've had a churn rate, and we start having like only two or three women start showing up to work. So, that has been really challenging for us.

Then we start to provide jobs to them in production units, say, for manufacturing of sanitary napkins, and so on, that there's a waiting list for women to work in such type of a role because it involves you working only

with other women, and in an enclosed space, where you just have to sit down and work and you're not interacting with any strangers. The problem with such types of manufacturing jobs is that they are inherently very limited—especially if it has to do with their vicinity, in their proximity, there are hardly any jobs available there. So, you can employ, at max, 10 people in such a unit. If you had to employ at large and build a large manufacturing factory, you would have about 2000- 3000 women or so on, that would have to travel a long distance to go to such factories, which again, those women would not be allowed to go for, because of the third constraint—of external constraints. So, I think at so many levels, women are experiencing challenges at the moment. This is something I'm studying as part of my Ph.D. here as well, at Stanford, which is around how we can ease up job opportunities for women, and create them in ways that are complying with the social norms that are currently existing.

Okay, moving on. Myna Mahila has transformed the lives of thousands of women from marginalized backgrounds, like you just shared, Suhani, helping them close the income gap. If you could share with us herels, is there a particular story of transformation that really moved you? Would you like to share something that you hold close to your heart?

I'll share a story of one of our very first employees and team members at Myna, Uzma. She came to us when she was 17. Her mother had brought her here when she'd heard that there was a women's center that provided jobs to women only. Her mom, when she came, was coughing a lot. She was crying and quite stressed. She said, "Please hire my daughter". And I asked her why—I mean, she seemed so young, she could be going to school. But she mentioned this was because Uzma's father had fallen off the 10th floor of a building; he had paralyzed himself and she didn't know how to pay the hospital bills. She was quite sick, the mother, and so she wasn't able to work. Uzma's elder brother was not educated and so he didn't



know how to find work. Nor was she, but now that she'd heard of this opportunity, she felt that maybe this was the way that they could actually save their family and actually be able to have a few meals in the day, which, in fact, at the time, they were not even able to afford.

So, when she came, so distressed, we took Uzma in; she was not educated, had never gone to school, couldn't read, write anything in any language. But over time, she stayed with us to observe what all the other women were doing in the office and the centers, and within about six months Uzma went from not being able to talk about her name, or even mentioning her name to us, to become confident enough to actually work in the center full time, go door to door explaining about menstrual health and periods to strangers at the doorstep. Then, she started to actually take part in our pad parades and be at the forefront of these pad parades, talking about how period blood is not bad blood, and talking on microphones loudly where everybody could see who she was, and make sure that people heard her. This was completely unusual.

So, I think we've seen an incredible change even in just short periods of time. I mean, Uzma's become one of the most important people in the organization, she is at the forefront of many of the media interviews that Myna gives, doing all kinds of incredible tasks with us. And it's not just Uzma. We have many women with us—there's Kajal, there's Maryam, and these are all young girls who joined us just when they were completing their teens, and have been with us almost since the very beginning. And they're doing incredibly well. Just because we really want to make sure that women are constantly seeing an upward trajectory in the organization, and they're really growing and building a career here.

Over the years, they start to develop this relationship and the sense of a place of belonging, and realizing that 'you know what - I'm worth much more than just being at home; I'm worth much more than the kinds of things that I hear at home, and the taunts that I hear because I'm reassured of that when I go to this office place.' I think that seeing all these kinds of stories every day is what keeps us going and what keeps me motivated to do this for the rest of my life.

Wow. That's such an incredible story of transformation. I think it is incredible the work that you've been doing.

And finally, how can the average Indian citizen support initiatives such as the Myna Mahila Foundation, what can each of us do to help women from socio-economically underprivileged backgrounds have consistent incomes and dignified work? What's your advice?

I have lots of pieces of advice, some that are longer-term mindset changes, and I think some that are implementable in the short term. I think, in the short term, it's really helpful when people provide one of two things, or both, which is either some time and sharing some skill sets that they have and providing some mentorship to women and girls. So, particularly calling on professionals from across different sectors, because today's women want to be all kinds of things in the world, whether it's from being accountants to teachers to doctors to lawyers to nurses, to I mean, all kinds of things. Now all these new fields are coming up as well. And they just don't have enough role models. So, I think this is something that many people like you and me, and college students can help and provide, and have a longer-term relationship with individual girls. It would really broaden their mindset, and open up all kinds of possibilities for them. Even for other types of skills, whether this is financial literacy skills or digital skills, there's a lot of scope for really trying to teach tangible skills to people today by sharing your time with them.

Two is sharing resources in terms of money, but in terms of money, that's really, thoughtfully spent. So, I think I would really urge and this also gets to the mindset change, to not ask questions to legitimate organizations that people truly believe in. 'Hey, I'm giving 100 rupees, how much of this 100 rupees is truly going to that girl?' We've been asked this constantly, all the time in the NGO sector. I think it kind of hinders progress in this space. Because, the more proportion of this that we say that we're spending



towards that girl, the less we're spending on the team that is going to deliver it to that girl. Now, the worse the team is, the worse the type of quality of outreach that girl is going to get. I think people don't get this because they want, somehow, all of this money to reach the girl. But how is that money supposed to reach the girl, if you cannot pay for a team that is world-class that you can truly trust to provide the right type of service to that girl? Then you shouldn't provide that money in the first place. So really being thoughtful, is not that, 'Hey, I care about that girl.' Because, if you truly care about that girl, you will care about how she's being treated, not just about how she was touched at all. You need to care about the quality, and to care about the quality, you need to be able to dig into your pockets and be able to want to spend for capacity building for organizations that really need it. We don't have enough organizations or individuals paying for actually creating world-class NGOs. And that's what we need today. Otherwise, we're going to have two million NGOs, six million NGOs today, and nothing will change. Because it's not the final beneficiary; it's the teams that are not equipped to do anything with those beneficiaries that are a problem today.

Thank you so much. Suhani, for all the insights that you shared so far. It's been a really interesting conversation, and we appreciate you spending the time to have this much-needed conversation with us. Thank you, and we look forward to following your journey and Myna Mahila's journey as we move ahead.

Thank you so much, Savitha. Thanks for having me here. This was a pleasure and I'd be happy to answer any questions or chat more about this later.

Thank you for listening to this episode! Remember, we may not turn into changemakers overnight, but all of us hold the power to lead small, incremental changes that can eventually make the world a more equal and fairer place. You can join the Accenture Vaahini Network, a networking forum for women professionals enabled by Accenture. The link to join is in the description of this episode. Also, don't forget to send in your feedback and thoughts to us!

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