



# **SHAPING ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN DISRUPTIVE TIMES**

**Stories of Indian women entrepreneurs  
braving a pandemic**





The **Women in Indian Social Entrepreneurship Network (WISEN)** program was designed and facilitated by **Amani Institute**, in collaboration with **the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE) India**, and with funding support from the **U.S. Consulate General in Chennai**.





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Close your eyes and imagine an entrepreneur. Who did you think of? Was it Elon Musk....or Bill Gates....maybe Mark Zuckerberg, or Sachin Bansal? The sad truth is, **less than 20% of India's entrepreneurs are women**, as per recently published reports. In a country with close to a 50% female population, this number is definitely not encouraging.

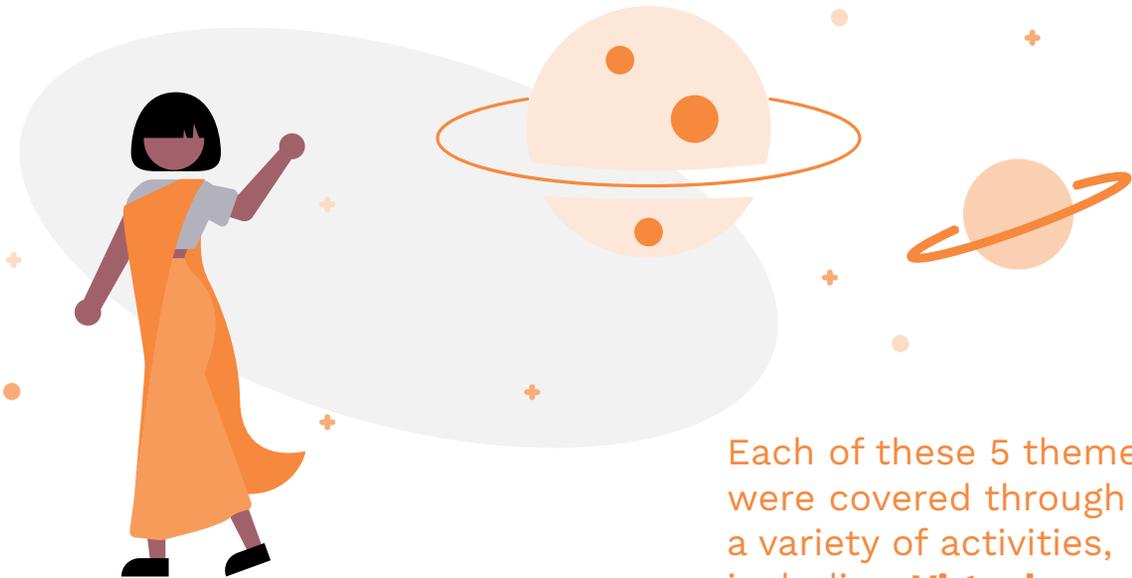
Women entrepreneurs are often subject to discrimination from their families, communities, and investors when compared to male peers. This issue is even more acute for women because social entrepreneurship can be stigmatized as being unprofitable.

We hypothesized that women-led social enterprises in India will benefit from the establishment of a formalized, cohesive network that would provide access to information, knowledge resources, mentorship and other opportunities that are currently lacking in both social and commercial enterprises - this is **why** the WISEN program was conceived by the U.S. Consulate General, Chennai and then brought to life by the Amani Institute and the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE) India teams.

**Over 215 women social entrepreneurs from all over India applied and 40 were finally selected as the founding group.**

In its initial design, the program was intended to provide the inaugural class with leadership and management skills to help them scale their businesses. With the disruptions caused due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the business and organizational realities of all 40 women entrepreneurs changed. It became even more important for them to equip themselves for an uncertain future. Keeping this in mind, we redesigned the WISEN program with the overall objective of making it **relevant** and **immediately applicable & useful** for the 40 selected women entrepreneurs

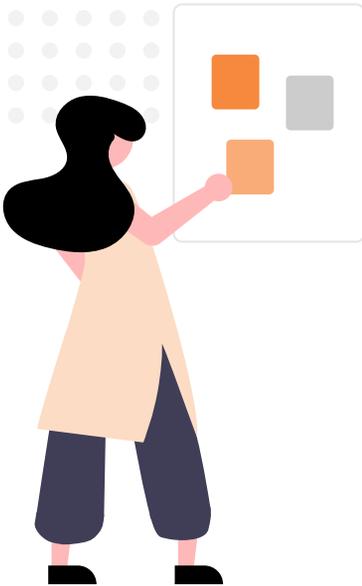
in a world that has drastically changed and continues to evolve in unprecedented ways. We wanted to create a self-sustaining network and community of practice for women entrepreneurs who were leading their organizations through a pandemic.



Each of these 5 themes were covered through a variety of activities, including: **Virtual training sessions, expert talk sessions, one:one coaching sessions, peer group discussions and reflection activities**



# PROGRAM BENEFITS



**1 Leadership:** Understand how to better lead themselves and their teams during uncertain, challenging times.

**Business Growth:** Apply knowledge of business models, scaling best practices, fundraising techniques, and more, towards stabilization/scaling efforts of their organizations.

**2**

**3**

**Community:** Utilize the support of their peer groups and access to networks to further their own organizational objectives.

**The Way Forward:** Take ownership of the network and put in place initial frameworks and processes to ensure continuity.

**4**



# The Founding group of entrepreneurs work towards the following SDGs:



Participants



Participants



Participants



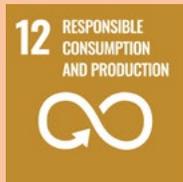
Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



Participants



# FOUNDING MEMBERS



**Anitha Shankar**  
*Founder,*  
*Astu Eco*



**Anju Bist**  
*Co-Director,*  
*Amrita SeRVe*



**Aparajita Pandey**  
*Founder & CEO,*  
*Haiyya*



**Ayesha Kalyan**  
*Co-Founder*  
*& Director,*  
*Varitra Foundation*



**Bharti Kannan**  
*Founder,*  
*Boondh*



**Bhavini Parikh**  
*Co-founder and CEO,*  
*Bunko Junko*



**Chetana Koulagi**  
*Founder & CEO,*  
*LetsTagOn*



**Deepa Pant**  
*Founder & CEO,*  
*SVATANYA*



**Divya P Venkat**  
*Co-Founder,*  
*ViDhai Recycling*



**Geeta Solanki**  
*Founder,*  
*Unipads India Pvt. Ltd.*



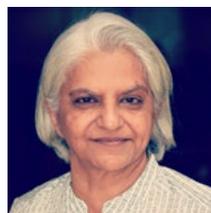
**Ishita Sharma**  
*Founder & Chief*  
*Trustee,*  
*MukkaMaar*



**Jayanti Mahapatra**  
*CEO,*  
*Manikstu Agro*



**Jigyasa Labroo**  
*Founder and CEO,*  
*Slam Out Loud*



**Jyoti Thyagarajan**  
*Managing Trustee,*  
*Meghshala Trust*



**Kalyani Gongi**  
*Founder &*  
*Managing Director,*  
*Ancient Living*



**Leena Dixit**  
*Founder & Director,*  
*Nativ Chefs*



**Mayura**  
**Balasubramanian**  
*Founder and CEO,*  
*Craftizen*



**Megha**  
*Co Founder, Chief,*  
*Growth- Project DEFY*



**Natasha Zarine**  
*Director,*  
*Ecosattva*



**Nidhi Pant**  
*Co-Founder - Finance*  
*& Partnership,*  
*S4S Technologies*



**Nilanjana Das**  
*Founder Director,  
 Action Center For  
 Transformation*



**M. Padmavathi**  
*Managing Trustee,  
 COROAT*



**Purnima Singh**  
*Co founder & CEO,  
 Shubham Crafts*



**Pooja Kaul**  
*Founder,  
 Organiko-  
 Beautifying Life*



**Pooja Rai**  
*Co-founder and CEO,  
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*Founder & CEO,  
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**Shriti Pandey**  
*Founder & CEO,  
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**Summaiya Afreen**  
*Director,  
 Lakshya Jeevan  
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**Shaona Sen**  
*Co-Founder & Director,  
 PASS Collective*



**Sheeba Sen**  
*CEO and Founder,  
 Alaap*



**Sucharita Eashwar**  
*Founder and CEO,  
 CWE*



**Shivani Gupta**  
*Co Founder & CEO,  
 Inochi Care*



**Suhani Mohan**  
*Founder & CEO,  
 Saral Designs*



**Usha Devi  
 Venkatachalam**  
*Founder & CEO,  
 Krishi Janani*



**Vithika Yadav**  
*Co-Founder &  
 Vice President,  
 Development  
 Consortium and  
 Co-Founder & Head,  
 Love Matters India*

# WHERE THE ENTREPRENEURS ARE LOCATED





# INTERESTED IN JOINING THE NETWORK?

Visit the WISEN  
website for more  
information!

[www.thewisen.in](http://www.thewisen.in)



# SO, WHY WRITE THIS PUBLICATION?

The year 2020 has had enough events take place to warrant a place for it in future history books. And while we battled challenge after new challenge that we came upon, we were fortunate enough to work alongside this very inspiring group of women social entrepreneurs from all over India. In the last 6 months of the year, we observed, trained, and learned from the multiple interactions we had with the WISEN group. And while supporting them in the 5 thematic areas that we mentioned earlier, we encountered a treasure trove of stories and learnings that we thought had to be shared. Hence, this publication. We hope that these stories and lessons learned will help other women social entrepreneurs across the globe in preparing themselves for the years ahead and equip them with new insights to lead their organizations through unprecedented times like these.

We've looked at how each of these 40 women entrepreneurs led their organizations during a pandemic and captured their stories and insights under the following 4 leadership areas:

- 1. Crisis management**
- 2. Business operations**
- 3. Personal leadership**
- 4. The new normal**

Read on to understand more about each of these topics!

## LEADERSHIP AREA 1: **Crisis management**

**“Suddenly, this crisis was the elephant in the room. There was no point in wasting this opportunity. Ideas flowed thick and fast. Covid pivots happened. Rumour had it that Meghshala was the only pan-state non-profit that was doing any work.”**

— Jyoti Thyagarajan

As a leader, how did you respond when the global crisis struck? What did you learn about your crisis management ability? What did you learn about your individual and organizational agility and adaptability? How did you respond to failure? Did you learn anything from it? Did you use your failures to create new opportunities? These are some of the questions we explored with the women entrepreneurs over the course of this year.

Managing a crisis is something that most of us have had to experience in our lives at some point or another. However, a crisis of this kind - a global pandemic - is unprecedented for most. So how most people reacted or responded to the situation was a mixture of what has worked for them in the past, what their 'gut instinct' was telling them and what people around them were doing. **With no previous experience of this magnitude before, what can we learn from this year which we can apply in crisis situations in the future?**

One of the most common things that we saw emerge in all the women was **agility** and a sense of calm decision making when balancing employee and organization welfare. And beyond that, we saw the **larger purpose** of contributing towards covid relief take centre-stage for many of the entrepreneurs.

**Natasha Zarine**, Director of Ecosattva, a one stop shop for all your needs for a sustainable lifestyle, reflects that their initial response when the pandemic struck was to ensure safety of the team. However they soon realised that the safety of the sanitation workers also held importance. In that pursuit, they initiated a fundraiser that ensured safety equipment and daily provisions for the workers. Though initially started for frontline workers, this movement grew and they gradually extended support to vulnerable communities. This movement ensured 12.68 lac meals to over 2300 families and when the migrant crisis struck, they sent 7500 people back home. Through this journey, Natasha shares that *"As a leader, I believe I was able to motivate my team and bring a community of people together to ensure that maximum relief was given to those that needed it the most this year."*

**"As a leader, I believe I was able to motivate my team and bring a community of people together to ensure that maximum relief was given to those that needed it the most this year."**

— **Natasha Zarine**

Going beyond your organizational business model, focusing on team welfare and working towards the larger good was also echoed by **Vithika Yadav**, Co-founder & Head of Love Matters India - a digital platform building awareness about love, relationships and sex. When the pandemic struck, Vithika found herself in situations that required immediate

actions and some, without a plan or a strategy. Gradually, it hit her that this might be the new normal for a while. With her leadership team, she started organizing meetings that kept staff welfare and operations at the center. They let go of the infrastructure costs and channeled that to staff salaries as it became increasingly clear that no new funding might be on the way. Digital operations was the next aspect of the change that the team embraced and they supported each other to manage the challenges of working from home. Vithika says that the paradigm shift she found herself in made her realize that *"perhaps I am an agile leader and that people's welfare was my priority and it was not a difficult decision at all for me to think of team welfare first and operations later."*

Yes, this is definitely easier said than done. And the road isn't a smooth one. Like majority of the people this year, our women entrepreneurs faced multiple obstacles and failures. For some organizations, it wasn't a sudden crisis with Covid but a slowly approaching crisis from 2019. As **Jyoti Thyagarajan** the Managing Trustee at Meghshala Trust, an organization focused on shrinking the teacher skill deficit, recalls *'As an organization, we failed quite spectacularly on cornering any philan-*

**“Perhaps I am an agile leader and that people’s welfare was my priority and it was not a difficult decision at all for me to think of team welfare first and operations later.”**

— Vithika Yadav

*thropic funds to cover our operating costs. It caused one young fund-raising employee to leave, saying she felt she was not contributing to our vision. It caused another to actively apply for other jobs, and it made the other folk quieter, and waiting and watchful. So in short, the famous high spirits in Meghshala were expunged, almost. I was in exactly the same state as everyone else. Low energy, “I have been here before” ennui, “Somebody, do something”- moments were thick on the ground. Then, COVID struck. Now THERE was an excuse to hang our low energy on, and a follow-on call to arms was timely. And I DO believe that call to arms*

*came from me. Oddly, I again became the “servant leader” that everyone had grown to expect. New ideas bubbled up, we pivoted - everyone came up with new paths, and I contributed at the same breakneck pace. Suddenly, this amazing crisis was the elephant in the room. There was no point in wasting this opportunity. Ideas flowed thick and fast. COVID pivots happened. Rumour had it that Meghshala was the only pan-state non-profit that was doing any work. Once again, we were the darling of the teachers.’*

Entrepreneurial journeys are usually lonely. And they’re even more lonely during a global pandemic. **The WISEN program provided the entrepreneurs with something that a lot of people were missing during the pandemic - a cohort, tribe, family, peer network, support group.** They found solace in each other by sharing ideas, hacks and resources and sought comfort in the feeling that has become quite familiar to all of us now - ‘we’re all in this together!’

Yes, we’re all in this together. The challenges you are facing at the moment are being met by others as well. Business models need to be adjusted or completely changed all together, fundraising techniques need to change, scaling plans need to be adjusted, the list goes on and on. But like **Anju Bist**, Co-Director, Amrita SeRVE, says ‘*All crises can be managed. The need is to stay present and do the best we can every single day. We have become stronger as a team. We have strengthened our production processes and are now single-mindedly pursuing the building of our last mile delivery network. The lockdown actually gave us a chance to **slow down, pause, reflect and then restart with the best and aiming for the best.***’ Amrita SeRVE is an organisation with the vision to teach villagers the skills they need to live in communities that are prosperous and self-reliant.

We know that many organizations have had to sometimes take drastic measures to cut costs and that many entrepreneurs are currently worried about the financial stability of their organizations. As Vithika goes on to share, ‘*A challenge that we faced through the pandemic was that a lot of projects in the pipeline pre Covid, did not come through as our client and donors had to rethink their strategies in the light of the pandemic. We had to undergo some cost cutting across the organization. Although this was not ideal, but clear and transparent communication across the team helped us take this step. We also used this time to relook at our growing strategy and designed a new program which has been launched already. Along with this, persistent communication with potential donors and clients and scouting for new opportunities has enabled us to be back on our feet and we have happily dissolved the cost cutting measures.*’

This is something that we saw echoed with all the women entrepreneurs we worked with last year. Sometimes, as leaders, we tend to over protect our team members and think that the lesser tough information they know, the better it will be for them. Something that all the WISEN members did

consistently this year was communicate transparently with their team. We did this at Amani Institute too - regular check-ins, global updates, country updates, motivation checks, etc. Transparent communication is almost always met with a gift - you see your team members rise up to the occasion in ways you wouldn't have imagined before.

When guest speaking at the 'Leading Teams' virtual training session, **Suchetha Bhat**, CEO of Dream a Dream, an organization working to empower young people from vulnerable backgrounds to overcome adversity and flourish in a fast changing world, stated that *'It is very difficult to build organization / team culture when you're in a crisis; in fact, a crisis shows you what your true organization / team culture is.'* This statement resonated with the entire group.

Here are some questions you can reflect on - How did your team react this year? Did they manage to support each other in other ways this year? What kept them going; what motivated them during these tough times? Answers to these questions will help you understand the culture that exists in your organization.

## LEADERSHIP AREA 2: **Business operations**

**“While we still kept pushing B2B sales, we had to align our strategies/marketing/business operations to sales to direct customers. It was a big ask, but because of our lean structure we were able to respond fast.”**

— Deepa Pant

Naturally, one of the first priorities for any entrepreneur this year was stabilizing business operations. For many of the women entrepreneurs in the WISEN program, this meant relooking at their business model and figuring out alternate ways to generate revenue this year, diversifying products or service offerings. For others, it meant understanding new and innovative ways of fundraising, reaching out to new types of donors and creating new programs to solve for immediate covid-related issues in the communities they were working with. Scaling strategies were either put on hold or took on a different form.

The first few months of lockdown were frustrating for many, especially for those who have fieldwork/travel as a core part of their model. Traditional ways of working were no longer possible and people had to eventually start adopting technology or figure out other ways of continuing to create impact.

Many of the entrepreneurs in the program adopted a two pronged approach when thinking of their business operations - 1. In what way can my current business survive using either current or new products or service offerings? 2. In what ways can my current business contribute towards covid relief? With organizations struggling to survive, the greater good still seemed to help keep people going. And sometimes, led to great examples of sectors coming together. **Suhani Mohan** is the co-founder and CEO of Saral Designs, a Mumbai-based start-up providing access to quality affordable menstrual hygiene products to low-income women in India, and she recalls, *'During the early days*

of extreme lockdown in April-May 2020, when the masks were in real scarcity, Saral remodeled Swachh (a machine originally designed for making menstrual pads) for making 3-ply surgical masks. The Mahindra Group took the machine to their plant and started manufacturing masks during the lockdown. They invested capital, resources and leveraged their supply chain to meet the urgent needs of the masks. This was a classic example of startup-corporate collaboration that combined the agility and innovation of a startup that was scaled up by corporates to cater to the needs of the time. We were even supported by the Marico Innovation Foundation and Cawach program of the Department of Science and Technology who funded us for increasing the mask production of our existing machine and extended the support in providing access to our masks to the frontline workers in municipal wards, hospitals and police stations. During the lockdown, we donated 1.2 million masks produced from Swachh machines to frontline workers. Additionally, we were also awarded the Millennium Alliance Round 6 (Covid-19 Innovation Grand Challenge) award to take Swachh 4.0 for producing both sanitary pads and 3ply masks in Rwanda.'

**Deepa Pant** is the co-founder and CEO of SVATANYA, a social enterprise that empowers women by skilling them to make handicraft products. She shares that they too responded to the mask shortage with urgency - within 10 days of lockdown. SVATANYA manufactured the masks and an online portal they partnered with ensured delivery across India. She says "It was an important learning on how to work around any situation, adapt to the new norm believing that come what may, the show must go on. We as a team proved to be resilient, pivoting according to the need of the times."

Deepa also had to adjust her target audience strategy this year. 'Our focus has always been B2B. With the pandemic and the economic slowdown, we immediately pivoted to B2C, focusing on online retail and direct customers. While we still kept pushing B2B sales, we had to align our strategies/marketing/business operations to sales to direct customers. It was a big ask, but because of our lean structure we were able to respond fast.'

The B2B/B2C dilemma was also faced by **Anitha Shankar**, Founder of Astu Eco, an organization in the pursuit of decreasing the use of disposable plastics globally. She shares, "Last year this time, we were at a total high after coming back from the U.S. as a prestigious National Geographic Ocean Challenge Winner. And the plan was to move into B2B with take-away containers in a big way and slowly move away from B2C, since this was one of the ways of achieving our target mass impact. But then Covid happened. 100s of restaurants closed. Most moved back to using plastic, and almost all, large or small, were in the cost cutting mode. So we moved back to B2C which was our bread and butter and even within this, the focus of products that add meaning and value to consumers during this pandemic was chosen to build on. Masks of course made sense and we had some good runs there."

**Usha Devi Venkatachalam**, Founder and CEO of Krishi Janani - a Farmers' Network for a Profitable & Regenerative Agroecology in Tamil Nadu - mentions 'The numbers of changes and adaptations we had to put in place in the short period of a year is amazing. We tried three different models of work from home. Janani 108, an emergency helpline for farmers, was born. We connected with government officials for various travel passes. None of our planned work for 2020 could be undertaken. However, there were so many other things that started and showed a new path forward.

*If it were not for the pandemic, we would not even know that we possessed these capabilities. It is like someone exercising for the first time. We discovered muscles (and that they ache! :-)) that we didn't know we had. The biggest takeaway for us is that we need to keep flexing these muscles often to stay fit. Adaptability & resilience are hard-won skills that the pandemic has gifted us with.*

*What were some of the ways in which the entrepreneurs managed their teams? What worked well and what didn't?*

**“It is like someone exercising for the first time. We discovered muscles (and that they ache! :-)).”**

— Usha Devi Venkatachalam

**Megha** is the Co-Founder and Chief of Growth at Project DEFY, an organization that creates teacher-less learning systems for marginalized communities. She recalls, *‘We started giving two days in a month off as “rest days” where all team members were just not working on anything at all. Our daily check in calls at 1 pm became very astute and succinct with tasks for the day. We were constantly checking in with*

*team members on their mental health status. We gave the whole office off from 24th Dec to 2nd Jan as “mental shut down days” insisting that team members do something that they are passionate about.’*

Gender also played a role in the way in which the effects of the pandemic were witnessed. As Usha recounts, *‘Majority of our staff were women. We focused a lot on hiring and nurturing young women from farming communities. When pandemic related lockdowns occurred, we shifted to working from home (wfh). Soon, we realized that this wfh model does not work for women. Socio-cultural expectations that they will continue to do household work meant that many struggled to even find space or quiet time to work. Even when everything else opened up, public transportation was still not available. It meant that women could not get to work either. This led to them dropping out of the workforce altogether. I am finding that this is a common problem across the world. The pandemic is setting back many hard-fought progress in women’s participation in the workforce. We are still trying to figure out how to address this.’*

One of the main reasons we created the WISEN program was to establish a network - the first of its kind network for women social entrepreneurs from across India. And what better a time for this to happen than 2020. **Ayeshna Kalyan** is the co-founder of Varitra foundation which helps schools and under-served communities identify systemic problems and design contextual solutions. She mentions, *‘We reached out to fellow entrepreneurs for not just work but also mental check-ins and support. A lot of friends opened their knowledge resources & frameworks saving us a whole lot of time and cost.’*

Collaboration and breaking the silos we normally witness in the sector is what the program also intended to achieve. And we saw this beautifully emerge in multiple ways through the course of the year. One such example was shared by **Usha Devi Venkatachalam**, of Krishi Janani. Usha shared with us this beautiful story of collaboration at the closing event of the program - *“It started with an experience shared during one of the Saturday sessions of WISEN. Geeta Solanki, Founder of Unipads, shared about her sales & distribution channel called Kalyani. Through this channel, women were serving as sales and distribution agents for reusable menstrual pads in Gujarat.*

*A short backstory - Janani, the regenerative marketplace that we are building in Tamil Nadu, connects organic farmers with consumers and companies looking to source verified organic products. At the time of the session, we were in the final stages of designing an alternate marketing channel for genuine organic products envisioning women as part-time sales agents.*

*Due to this, Geeta’s sharing set off a lot of sparks in*

**“This is the magic of WISEN’s connection & collaboration possibilities - bringing a lesson learned in Gujarat to a social enterprise in Tamil Nadu while offering a scaling opportunity to an entity in Kerala.”**

— Usha Devi Venkatachalam

my mind. I reached out to Geeta who was kind enough to share a lot of details about the Kalyani program. Most importantly, she also advised us on the pitfalls to avoid as well as tips on how to help the women sales agents.

Thus Annalakshmi program was born with inputs from the Kalyani program.

In this process, we also reached out to Anju Bist, Co-Director of Saukhyam reusable pads. They are based in Kerala and were looking for opportunities to scale their impact in other states. This conversation resulted in a product partnership where Annalakshmis are selling Saukhyam's reusable pads in Tamil Nadu.

*This is the magic of WISEN's connection & collaboration possibilities - bringing a lesson learned in Gujarat to a social enterprise in Tamil Nadu while offering a scaling opportunity to an entity in Kerala."*

## LEADERSHIP AREA 3: Personal leadership

**“My ability to listen to my team’s personal and professional grievances came alive. I have been able to listen more, delegate more and practice backseat support as much as possible.”**

— Ayeshna Kalyan

At Amani Institute, one of the main pillars of our training model to build the capacities of social impact leaders is Personal Leadership. We've realized that leadership development is incomplete without addressing how each changemaker is able to lead themselves through the rigors of their work. Personal leadership is about developing a deeper awareness and more nuanced understanding of how each of us show up as leaders. And in doing so, we can learn how to effectively manage ourselves better while leading others.

The pandemic year put the personal leadership abilities of each WISEN participant to the test. During their 6-month training program, they documented and shared insights from their journey, while exploring questions like ‘What personal transformation did I undergo while leading my organization through the pandemic?’, ‘How did I show up for myself and my organization?’, ‘What leadership qualities of mine came alive?’, ‘What did I do well?’, ‘and what did I struggle with?’ In this section we explore insights from four changemakers.

**Ayeshna Kalyan**, Co-Founder of Varitra Foundation says, for her this has been a year of slowing down. *“I feel I’ve become more anchored in terms of pace and ambition. I have also started practicing gratitude and appreciation within the team, something that perhaps was overlooked pre-covid due to the mad rat race”. For Ayeshna, this meant pressing the pause button on years of work and taking a step back to see the bigger picture. This helped her resist the urge to “aggressively fight the high tides” and take a more measured approach to tackling the situation.*

**In adopting this reflective approach, Ayeshna says “my ability to listen to my team’s personal and professional grievances came alive. I have been able to listen more, delegate more and practice backseat support as much as possible.”** Slowing down to take stock of the situation helped Ayeshna also practice delegation as a way of identifying and nurturing more leadership within her team. In contrast to Ayeshna’s approach of stepping back to get what we call the ‘balcony view’, **Anju**

**Bist**'s insights came from what she describes as *“getting down into the trenches and working alongside the team”*. Anju is the co-director of Amrita SeRve and leads the Saukhyam Reusable Pads project which specializes in the production of low-cost, reusable sanitary pads made from banana fiber.

Anju feels proud of showing up for her team on the ground when they needed her the most. She was able to gain new perspectives on the ground situation and guide her team forward. *“Since June, when we resumed production, we have almost come back to pre-pandemic production levels and are in some ways much better in terms of quality. We have better ability now to meet large orders as well”*, she says.

By working on the ground alongside her team, Anju also got involved in the production process. *“I am proud of the fact that I learned stitching. And can now myself produce a pad. Although there is still a lot I cannot do”*, she says. *“I have also seen that I need to build leaders within the team”*, she adds.

For **Megha**, co-founder at Project DEFY, and her team, 2020 was a whirlwind of a year. In March, around the time when the pandemic hit, her team was all set for the next financial year, with a clear plan on what they were setting out to create this year. It wasn't until May that the reality of it all dawned on them, with people backing out, funders withdrawing support and plans for the year getting disrupted. Looking back, Megha recalls that the silver lining during this tough phase was how the team rose to the challenge and rallied around each other. *“It was amazing to see the whole team coming together and saying ‘let’s just spend this year learning new things’”*, she recalls. What Megha was witnessing was a wave of emergent leaders in her team, leading themselves through a process of reinvention.

*“To have everyone show up saying that ‘This matters to us’ was incredible! It kept us, the founding team going, because they showed up.”* With her team modelling emergent leadership so proactively, Megha knew she had to do everything she could to help them get through the year. *“I believe getting my team to plough through this year was critical. Keeping a steady focus on the vision and how the team aligns with it was my focus. I was constantly aware of what personal struggles team mates were going through. Each one of them taught me how we are all committed to doing what we do”*, she says. Megha also demonstrated empathy and self-care to her team by recognizing the mental support she needed for herself and seeking it.

While joining the WISEN program, **Padmavathi Vasanthan**, the managing trustee of Community Renovation and Organization Trust (COROAT) - a grassroots level organization that empowers women and children from marginalised communities, set herself the goal of becoming more self-aware as a leader.

During her coaching sessions with the Amani team, Padmavathi spent time understanding her core values and looked at how they were shaping her decisions and actions as a leader. Her coaching conversations revealed that courage, accountability and risk-taking were important values for her. In a year marked by depleted resources, rejections from funders and a lack of social interactions with her team, building her own confidence became a top priority for Padmavathi. She needed to lead herself to a new state of readiness and optimism to be able sail through these challenging times. She realized that this wasn't an epiphany that was going to happen one fine day. She wasted no time in getting down to living her core values. When funding pipelines dried up, she began offering consultancy services to other organizations to earn revenue. She also moved out of her comfort zone to get her team to migrate to adopt virtual training methods. Taking these risks and making small but steady changes have helped Padmavathi regain the momentum and confidence she was missing. *“I have de-*

**“This training process has enabled me to understand the gap in my strategy and intervention. Now I am in an informed position to move forward to tap the new opportunities.”**

— Padmavathi Vasanthan

personal leadership. For Ayeshna, it was about slowing herself down to see the big picture and then taking informed decisions about the way forward for her organization. On the other hand, Anju needed to be present with her team, on the ground, in the thick of things, to guide them forward. She also invested time in learning the production process herself. Inspired by her team’s emergent leaders, Megha demonstrated empathy and self-care as a strong value to uphold in her organization. In being attuned to her team’s needs, she reaffirmed their faith in her and the organization. In seeking mental health support for herself, she demonstrated self-care as a value that is encouraged in the workplace. Padmavathi led herself through a situation that depleted her resources and confidence. She became more aware of her core values and that helped her understand the reason behind the choices she was making for herself and her organization.

*veloped courage, patience, looking at everything with reasoning and stopped getting into emotions. I accepted the failures. I have learnt the reasons behind my failure. This training process has enabled me to understand the gap in my strategy and intervention. Now I am in an informed position to move forward to tap the new opportunities.”*, she says.

As we’ve seen from the stories of Ayeshna, Anju, Megha and Padmavathi, the practice of personal leadership manifests in very different ways for each individual. We’ve also seen the broad range of aspects that come under the umbrella of per-

## LEADERSHIP AREA 4: **The new normal**

**“We were procrastinating opening a regional sales office due to budget constraints. But due to the pandemic, sales team members relocated to their hometowns which made regional sales representatives a possibility for us.”**

— Suhani Mohan

*“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but seeing with new eyes”*. This quote from French novelist Marcel Proust reminds us about the possibilities of seeing our current realities through a different lens, especially after a year like 2020 which turned out to be an unplanned journey with many challenges and discoveries for all of humanity.

Moving on from 2020, from the ground up, what is the new normal starting to look like for the WISEN members and their organizations? What changes or shifts are going to become more or less permanent for them?

Leading her organization through the pandemic made SVATANYA’S Deepa Pant realize the power of reframing her narrative. *“Covid has helped me realize the real value of SVATANYA. There has been a*

*conscious shift in our pitch from - ‘the women need work, we will do whatever comes our way, we will bend backwards to make it work - to - we make beautiful products, we fulfill the customer’s needs, we add value to our customers choices by making high quality, conscious products and we create in a way that makes it a win-win for everybody’, she says.*

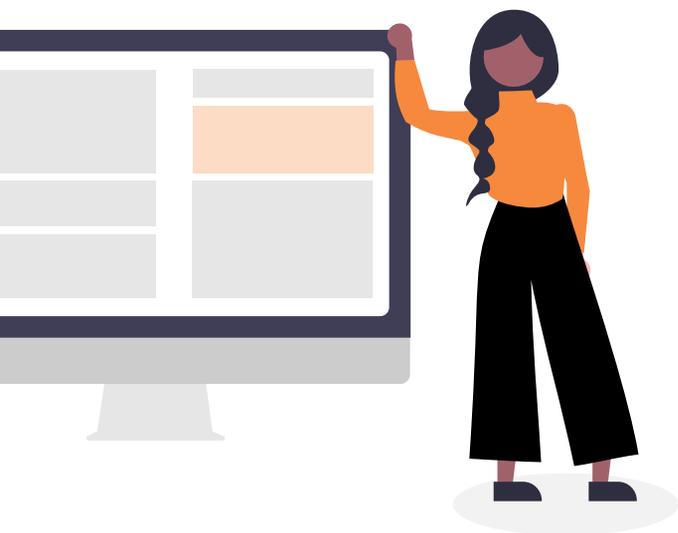
For Deepa, the new normal is a world that demands empathy for stakeholders and reinvention at many levels, not just to stay afloat but to thrive in the face of uncertainty.

For **Suhani Mohan**, Co-Founder and CEO of Saral Designs, the pandemic catalyzed a decision that she and her team had been postponing indefinitely due to budget constraints. *“We were procrastinating opening a regional sales office due to budget constraints. But due to the pandemic, sales team members relocated to their hometowns which made regional sales representatives a possibility for us”,* she says. The new normal also means a new way of working at Saral Designs. *“For some teams, we are looking at work from home as a norm with once a week/ month in-person meetings only”,* she adds.

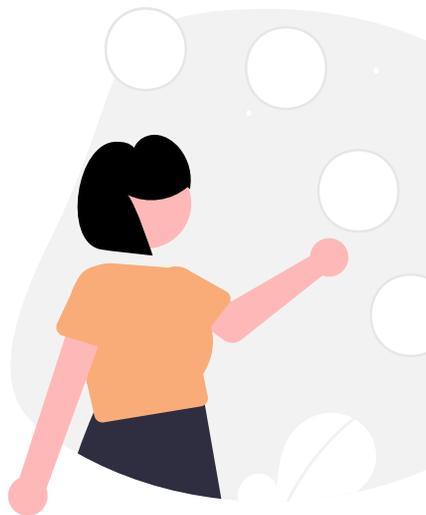
For **Purnima Singh**, the co-founder and CEO of Shubham Crafts, a Jaipur-based handicrafts manufacturing start-up - the new normal is about diverse sourcing and digitization. Purnima’s marketing strategy was largely focussed on the fairs organized by the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts. The pandemic situation forced even the fair to take on a virtual format. *“Everything is going online so we need to improve our digital presence”,* she says.

Purnima’s story of adapting to digital technologies is representative of the general shift that many organisations in WISEN are going through. **For some, this includes adopting a work-from-home strategy** (as in the case of Padmavathi, Megha and Suhani) **while for others, digital transformation is about changing entire business models and marketing strategies.**

Our story at Amani Institute is no different. Prior to the pandemic, most of our global and regional programs were delivered mainly in-person. Our participants travelled across the world or within our host countries to attend our skill building programs. The pandemic and the resulting lockdowns across the world forced airspaces to be shut, restricting all travel to any of our programs. **With all our global and regional programs being called off, we had to make an urgent and effective pivot to digital platforms and online training.** In **two months**, we re-designed all our programs and offered them as fully online versions, with the same value that our earlier in-person offerings brought. What seemed at the time like a temporary shift has now proved to be a more or less permanent delivery strategy for us, thanks to the tremendous success of the inaugural online version of our flagship 5-month program in Social Innovation Management, that received over 250 applications from across 21 countries. Our new normal is a scenario in which we are fully equipped to deliver our program online as well as in-person, as and when the situation allows for that.



# INSIGHTS FROM THE PROGRAM



For us at Amani Institute, creating and facilitating such a transformational program for women entrepreneurs from across India has been a steep and fulfilling learning curve. Broadly speaking, there were 4 key elements of this program that created immense value for the participants. They include the design of the program, skills training, leadership coaching and community building. Here are our top takeaways from each of these areas:

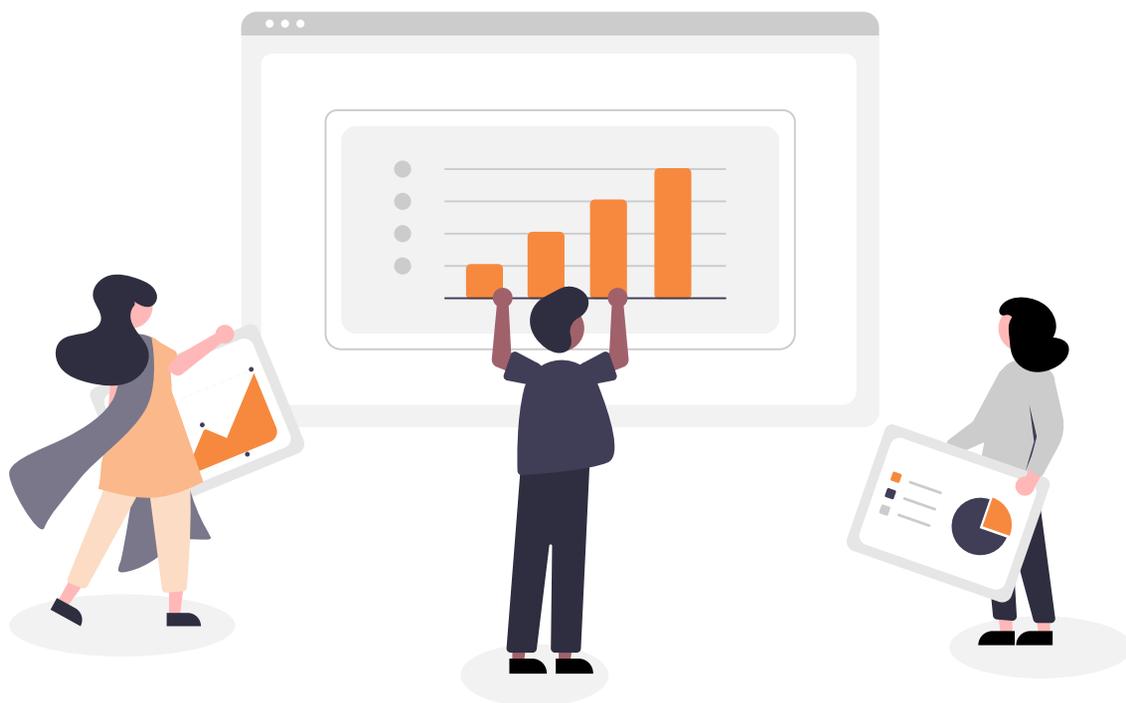
## 1. Program Design

What made this program unique was that the primary design objective wasn't just skills development in the traditional sense. The larger purpose and objective of the program was to create a self-sustaining network and community of practice for women entrepreneurs who are leading their organizations through a pandemic. Training for specific skills therefore became a subset of this program and not the main component. **This broadened focus helped us create many more opportunities and experiences that helped the participants not just learn new skills but also harness the collective expertise and wisdom in the community that they were forming.** In keeping community building as the focus, we were able to curate conversations, facilitate the sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources, and create a culture of appreciation and peer learning within the cohort. One of our partners in this program, ANDE

India, played a key role in this process. ANDE is a global network of organizations that propel entrepreneurship in emerging markets. Their guidance and support to the founding group of entrepreneurs has been integral in helping them decide the actual form of the network, its vision, operating model, and plans for the upcoming years.

**“The program was well planned and executed. The themes, content and speakers were very relevant and well organised. The learning is immense. The peer group and discussions provided great support and helped keep the momentum. Although the sessions spanned across 5 months, it did not feel that long because of the constant communication and participation prompts. I thoroughly enjoyed the program and would highly recommend anything that would be led by Amani.”**

— **Rema, Fairkonnnect**



## 2. Coaching

Each of the 40 participants worked on an Action Learning Project in which they defined a focus area within their business where they would apply the skills and tools they learnt from the program. We offered the participants personalized coaching to support them in making progress on their learning goals. **One of our key insights during the coaching process was that many of the participants were both business leaders and at a crossroads in their own career transitions.** A common question we found some of them asking was - How might I set up my organization for becoming self-sustaining in the next three years, so that I can move on from my role as the founder and CEO and plan my next journey as a changemaker? This, of course, was just one of the myriad topics we explored deeply during

the one:one coaching conversations. The coaching process helped create a contemplative space away from the hustle of their daily operations, where they could engage in a deliberate self-inquiry and reflect on the key decisions that they were going to take.

**“It was a wonderful learning experience and especially the 1:1 coaching sessions. It has helped us to gain many insights and business knowledge which are helping us and supporting us during this unpredictable time.”**

— **Bhavini, Bunko Junko**

## 3. Community Building

Over the last 6 months, the WISEN program laid the foundation for 40 women

entrepreneurs from across the country to function as a professional community of practice. The common thread that held this diverse group of changemakers together was the fact that they were all looking for ways to address the disruptions caused by the pandemic and help their organizations grow. **Creating a shared platform for them to engage with each other ensured that they learned collectively, built trust and relationships, and discovered that they have shared concerns that could be addressed by the collective knowledge, resources and wisdom of the community.** With the WISEN now becoming an autonomous and self-driven network, there is immense potential for this community of practice to grow and also be replicated as a successful model in other sectors as well.

“The program experience was wonderful as I got the chance to interact and share my thoughts with some amazing social entrepreneurs across the country. The group was a huge support as we have discussed everything with each other during our calls.”

— **Summaiya, Lakshya Jeevan Jagriti**

## 4. Training and Development

Last but definitely not least, the virtual training sessions which took place on the last Saturday of every month helped us explore topics which were immediately relevant to the women entrepreneurs. In addition to the Amani training facilitators, we also brought in experts from India and the U.S to share tools, frameworks and insights with the participants on topics such as business models, scaling strategies, fundraising, leading teams and wellbeing & personal leadership development. The training sessions were experiential in nature and allowed the participants to explore deeper

conversations and apply their learning real-time. And because we were meeting every month, we also had the opportunity to share stories of successful applications in the workplace or troubleshoot challenges with implementation. This helped us beautifully tackle the most prevalent challenge of training and development - learning being forgotten soon after attending a program.

“This was initially planned as an in-person program. When it became virtual due to the pandemic, I was unsure about how impactful it would be. However, thanks to Amani’s effort at being thoughtful of the new medium, the experience ended up being super useful for our efforts to grow in the middle of numerous challenges.”

— **Usha, Krishi Janani**

# CONCLUSION

2020 was a year in which we saw people and organizations rethinking their purpose and reinventing themselves at a scale we have never witnessed before. The disruptions caused by the covid-19 pandemic threatened the survival of businesses and also the livelihoods of people across the globe. Business leaders saw themselves faced with the challenge of not just helping their organizations survive but also being personally invested in ensuring the wellbeing of their people and teams. Alongside a looming financial crisis was also a mental health and wellbeing crisis that was screaming for global attention.

For us at Amani Institute, 2020 made us not just reinvent the way we deliver our programs worldwide but also rethink the context in which we will now help people and organizations lead social impact. Capacity building is not just about training for skills or better performance. It is about helping organizations and business leaders identify themselves as contributors to a larger good. It is about organizations within a sector, and beyond, coming together to form communities of practice - to solve shared challenges collectively, to pool resources, knowledge and expertise that can make a positive difference to customers and society as a whole. And we believe that the WISEN project is a living example of the potential that such an approach to capacity building holds for bringing about social impact.

At Amani Institute, we believe we are poised to lead this global paradigm shift in developing people and organizations who lead social impact. With our time-tested models and approach to higher education and leadership development, we are excited to harness more than a decade of experience and expertise in building communities of practice that can solve global challenges collectively. If you're looking to explore such an approach for your organization or if you're looking to support such initiatives with your resources or funds, we invite you to get in touch with us to explore possibilities together.



WRITE TO US AT

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OR VISIT OUR WEBSITE

▶ <https://amaniinstitute.org/>

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