

Women in Plastics



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Behind every successful woman is HERSELF.

Women, who represent half of humanity have been playing significant roles in our industry and our societies for eons. As leaders and mentors, they traverse the complexities of business and elegantly balance their lives, supporting, nurturing and empowering other women around them. On its second anniversary, Plexconnect presents this elite squad of the Plastics Industry, as we celebrate these powerful business leaders who refuse to give into stereotypes, breaking through the glass ceiling, their powerful voices heard across the industry and their inspired leadership, shaping the lives of those that surround them. We bring you 5 incredible women and insights into their inspiring journeys.

(Interview excerpts)

What was your inspiration behind choosing a career in the plastics industry?

AS: Born, brought up and married into a conservative family, it wasn't an option for choosing a career in plastics but rather it was the need of the hour back then to support my husband, who was into manufacturing of Medical Disposables. It was he who recognised and acknowledged my willingness, devotion and entrepreneurial qualities to run the business systematically. Being a housewife for the previous 9 years and a mother of two small children, it was a new realm of struggle as I started this new path of medical industry. Along with manag-

ing the house and kids, I had to learn across new terms, systems & technology to have a greater understanding of this industry.

KA: In the 1990s the inspiration to take up a career for women rooted in tradition-bound families was a rare or accidental occurrence! There were inspiring women in art, music, politics, etc. but not in Industry as such in India. I just started looking for a job and entered FARCOT which was very renowned and the first Indian company specialized in cat cables technology. FARCOT started working towards being an all-in-one industry which included integrating the cable compound manufacturing as well. I entered FARCOT during their R&D phase in PVC manufacturing. It was a great platform for me. I didn't stop with the assigned core work but worked out the algorithm to widen my field of work to grow with my simultaneously company at that time and understood the different facets of plastics and their industrial use.

KD: My Father is Mr. C N Doshi Founder of Rajoo Group.

PT: I attended the composites industry exhibition in India (ICERP) and in Paris (JEC Show) and was very impressed with the applications of composites and the potential composites have. This greatly motivated me to pursue a career in this industry; particularly when I saw top notch scientists of our country like Dr. R. Chidambaram (atomic energy chairman and scientific advisor to G.O.I.), and the rocket man, late Hon'ble Dr APJ Abdul Kalam as chief guests at the ICERP.

RA: My mum was a homemaker, and while we were always well-supported, I had first-hand seen the struggle that women faced when they were not financially independent. It wasn't only about money; it was about the power to make choices on one's own terms. When I was in my first year of my Bachelors' degree, I took mathematics to support myself. I knew that when I graduated, I wanted to do something in manufacturing. Honestly, plastics happened by chance - my husband, and co-founder, Makrand is from Chandrapur where there are a lot of cement manufacturing factories. Makrand knew that there was a huge market for cement packaging, and that is how we got into woven sack trading. 3 years later, we started Emmbi and the rest, as they say, is history!

In typically male dominated industries, what are the real opportunities for women to rise to leadership roles?

AS: It could be said that industries are mainly dominated by males and the presence of females is quite for namesake in any segment which in India especially, is hindered by household responsibilities and duties. Real leaders do not wait for real opportunities, they make the best of what they can. I think the entire gender bias should not be dragged up here as the hidden sub-context of the entire discussion which shifts it towards a more of a social issue.

KA: Maybe you have to acquire the so-called 'female' qualities - keep an eye on new / better ways of doing things, on the alchemy of developing products and the markets, be ambitious, assertive, and willing to do hard bargains.

KD: While girls are taught to play it safe, smile pretty and get all A's, boys are taught to play rough and swing high. In other words, we are raising our girls to be perfect, and raising our boys to be brave! Such differences in upbringing begets Emotional intelligence — the ability to recognize emotions in self and others and relate, which is something that has recently gained momentum as essential leadership behaviour. This is something that comes more naturally to women than men. To truly create a great place to work and to get the best out of employees, demonstrating emotional intelligence as a leader is critical.

PT: I think things are very different in current times. There are several opportunities for women if they are willing to take up the roles which used to be typically male dominated in the past. Not only do many companies have women at the helm today, but some of the top countries have women Presidents and Prime ministers and are extremely successful in driving these countries. More women are graduating in various engineering disciplines and getting jobs in otherwise traditionally male

dominated professions. Women leaders bring in a different perspective and approach to modern day problems which give their companies another dimension and an advantage.

RA: Frankly, and while I do not mean to be a pessimist, the opportunities are limited, and also greatly vary from one company to the next. I think it is important for women to carefully vet a company before they take up a job - see if there are women in leadership positions, check on policies for mothers, and try to speak to some women working there. In addition, we need to start making a business case for why gender diversity is important - there's already so much research that shows that having a diverse employee base adds to a company's bottomline; so, if you see that and still choose not to hire women or minorities, it's because of your social bias, not because you're protecting your company.

What would be your advice to young women who wish to enter into male dominated professions?

AS: It is not that easy to enter into male dominated professions but, if you like to accept challenges and you are willing to fight back no matter how high the tides are then you should not be afraid of any gender bias, because what matters is skill. Your skill and calibre along with perseverance and diligence will always bear the results you could have ever wished for.

KA: Women are all-rounders, multi-taskers and we can seamlessly transition between different roles in our personal and professional lives. We should never be intimidated by a male-dominated profession. If you desire, you will make it happen. So, do not doubt yourself. Moreover, in any career, we need to give our best and this applies to both men and women.

KD: To the young women I would like to say that believe in yourself, be confident and always be true to yourself. Respect womanhood and perform the duties it comes with.

PT: It is not really the profession that is male dominated. I think if they have the skill set and commitment there are equal opportunities for women in almost all professions. My advice would be to follow one's passion no matter what. And to not be apprehensive or fearful to venture into a male dominated industry if you're interested in it. Take any setbacks that come your way in your stride and don't let others' opinions (without solid reasoning) weigh you down.

RA: Find a mentor! Someone who will help you as you rise through the ranks or pivot in your career. Also, find male allies in the workplace. However much we want this to change, men are currently on the top seat, and so one needs to be able to create alliances that can help one break the glass ceiling. And if you are the first or only woman to rise in your company, do not let yourself be tokenized - make sure you're not the last, and that you leave the place better than you found it.

As a female leader, what have been your most significant barriers? How did you overcome these?

AS: For me personally the most significant barrier in my journey was society which was not exactly kind to me since society is not quite kind when it comes to accepting changes. But gradually as I worked diligently through the years, my hard work paid off and was reflected well in the company. I saw the change and even now when I am answering your questions over here, I feel I am bringing a change. I have mentored a number of women over the years in different roles and promoted their talents, recognised their work, and given training in the same way as men to empower and build their confidence. There have been other barriers too in my life but, now when I look back upon them, I feel it is quite unjust to label them as barriers because what they actually do is bring a balance in a woman's life. Balance is necessary to distinguish oneself from a machine.

KA: In the initial 10 years of my career, the barriers were mostly external in the legal system, logistics, finance, negotiations, building new vendor relations, hustling the unfair competitions in but you need strategic thinking and resilience to handle them. Even internally, in the Organisation, you have to learn to work with your competitive colleagues. The family as such was not a barrier since it just allowed me to go ahead in pursuing my career.

KD: Progress does not mean parity. Working in a climate where you have been historically excluded — like in manufacturing, corporate boardrooms, or even in Engineering — can lead women to question their abilities. While observing what causes self-doubt, particularly for women in male-dominated fields, I have observed that there are numerous factors at play. Chief among them: gender bias that comes in both explicit and subtler forms. The end result is that highly skilled women succumb to stereotype-driven expectations. It begins early when girls as young as six stop believing that girls are the smart ones, while boys continue to believe their gender is gifted. As women get older, these stereotypes discourage them from pursuing careers thought to be typically reserved for men. Acceptance is the first step towards overcoming any barrier! Though I have not really faced such barriers, I feel that once we accept the limitation as an individual, one can always chart out further

ways and means to overcome the same.

PT: I am fortunate to have had immense support from my colleagues in my organisation and the industry in India and overseas. In general, there are apprehensions. However, over time people get used to it and start accepting.

RA: To begin with, we have to start by acknowledging that there is a problem. In the last Fortune 500 list there were more men named John than there were women. In manufacturing, and plastics too, it is not just that the industry is male-dominated, but also that the leadership is too. For example, in our industry association, IFIBCA, I am currently the only active woman leader. Here, my most significant barrier was learning how to be vocal - you tell yourself it is easy, but it can be terrifying. It is like peeling off a band-aid though, you just have to do it once. I also faced barriers with regard to family planning and being so involved with my career. After my daughter was born, I took a year off from work, and if it were not for my husband's push, I am not sure I would have so wholeheartedly returned. We also took the decision to not have a second child, because we were not sure that we would be able to do justice to all our responsibilities. So, to all the unmarried women - find a spouse who is ready to be a champion for your career! It is not that you will not succeed otherwise, but this just makes it so much easier.

What does Women's empowerment mean to you? As a leader, how do you envisage a greater role for women in your organization?

AS: Women empowerment for me is ensuring equality in terms of dignity, pay and role in an organisation without any gender bias and purely based on the skill set and diligence of the person. Motivating women to change the current stigma of a male dominated workplace and ensuring fair grounds on which their hard work and dedication is assessed and evaluated with men could be the way which can help women achieve a greater role not in my organisation itself but also, society.

KA: Empowerment here means you become the master of what you are assigned to do and if you want to grow with the organization, you follow some path, and if you are free to move about there are many paths. Better to acquire higher knowledge in your line of work. You cannot ignore a few commitments at home and still have to make a choice. Inside an organization, it is your work and competence that empower you.

KD: We have been living in a male dominant world for too long. There were these preconceived notions where women were supposed to do a particular kind of work and in many ways suppressed. Times are changing, now you see a lot more women coming out and proving

that they are no less than their male counterparts and sometimes even better. We still have a long way to go but change has started, we will see a lot more women stepping out for work and prove their prowess. We as a company have strict policies for gender equality and non-discrimination. We aim to have a 50% female work force by 2030 to support it. In fact, I am reminded of what Swami Vivekananda said "The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women. There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved."

PT: Women empowerment is extremely important to me. Our own organisation has grown with the contribution and hard work of women in key / important departments, and this will certainly continue.

RA: Women's Empowerment means that women should be able to take more decisions, and to navigate their life - whether personal or professional - on their own terms. Currently, we see a lot of women in roles at the bottom of the chain, clerical jobs in the corporate world, or labour on Indian farms, women are doing the brunt work and not being given the opportunities to rise above it. Women need to be more confident in their ideas and what they are proposing - don't end your sentences with a questioning tone, be assertive. I envisage a greater role for women at Emmbi through improved policy making for our current state, as well as investment in girls pursuing STEM education through our CSR budgets, so we are able to increase women's participation in the pipeline for the future.

What can the plastics industry do to attract a greater number of women into its workforce?

AS: Creating a safe and healthy workplace, equal pay for equal work, locomotive facilities, flexible working time for female workers are some of the very basic yet important measures which can be taken up to attract a greater number of women into the plastics industry.

KA: We need to provide equal opportunities; a level playing field and ensure pay on par with Industry standards. All the Plastic training institutes every year send out 90% resumes of only Men to companies. Either these institutes are not women friendly or something is missing. This has to be corrected at Grass root levels. Unless you provide training to women in Plastics technology, how will the industry absorb them? There should be better concessional interest rates from Banks to women entrepreneurs. The Government did start Allotment of industrial lands to Women entrepreneurs at concessional price but this was not regulated properly and did not reach the genuine entrepreneur.

KD: Plastics Industry should motivate women professionals by giving exposure to various technical fields and should not be limited to back office desk jobs i.e. HR, finance and administration. We do not often see women on the shop floor in the Indian industry compared to other developed countries like USA Europe etc. Indian Plastics Industry has not witnessed single female machine operator so far! However personally I strongly feel that women can run any kind of machine if given exposure and safe working environments. Today it is all about automation and knowledge, women are flying airplanes and leading space flights. It is not just about might or strength, but about intelligence and education.

PT: The industry can sponsor a women's scholarship programme in engineering schools such as ICT, MIT etc. where courses specific to the industry are offered. The modern plastics Industry requires job skills like product designing, packaging, automation, IT support, advertisement, branding, human engineering, etc. where women have proved to be very good.

RA: Lots! To begin with, improve the work culture on the shop floor to help women employees be more comfortable - cleaner toilets, menstrual leaves, etc. Start them young - take more training and on-campus seminars to help women believe that there is a place for them in the industry. Train recruiters to avoid inherent biases in recruiting so that people are on boarded for their talent and skills.

Who (women, especially) has been your inspiration and what have you learned from them/her?

AS: My mother, who taught me hard work, honesty and dedication. My mother-in-law who supported my work and taught me how to avoid external influences which could affect my work. My husband who went through thick and thin with me and helped me get accustomed to the workplace and the corporate life.

KA: When I began my career, the ratio of women working was very small but growing in numbers in the IT field. I had some inspiration from the new entrepreneurs of those days. However, in my case, it was all a search in the woods and finding my way.

KD: Research shows that when women are exposed to powerful female role models, they are more likely to endorse the notion that women are well suited for leadership roles. My mother-in-law who is a Paediatrician has been my inspiration as a woman. She not only inspires me but also helps to navigate adverse emotions which arise out of work & personal life. Balancing professional & personal life will be a challenge for any working woman and she has not only inspired me to overcome domestic challenges but always hand holds me in easing

out domestic task and rise to achieve the ultimate goal.

PT: I have been inspired by many women leaders like Indra Nooyi, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Angela Merkel, etc. However, one of my biggest inspirations has been the past President & CEO of JEC GROUP: Mrs. Frédérique Mutel. Over the course of my career, I have seen her take JEC to new heights with exhibitions across four continents and the build the strongest network for the global composites industry. Her dedication, knowledge, involvement, attention to detail and eort to build and maintain a rapport with the entire industry has been key to her success. Apart from this I am also greatly inspired by my aunt, Padma Shri Bhawana Somaaya who is an Indian êlm journalist, critic and an author of several books. Her work ethic, sincerity, hard work and unique perspective on things are admirable.

RA: I am inspired by a lot of women - my mum, who raised us to be independent against all odds, my daughter, who pushes me to think of intersectionality in feminism; my best friend, Manu, who has braved a career in aviation and raised two stunning kids. But also, strong voices like Faye DĂSouza, Roxane Gay, and Gauri Shinde, who are constantly redeêning the change that wom - en can bring.

Where can we ênd you on a Saturday or Sunday morning? What would you be doing?

AS: You can ênd me cooking a nice hearty meal for my family, enjoying some fresh air with my family over a cup of tea, chatting about the week and trimming my bonsai plants at my terrace garden.

KA: You will ênd me at home relaxing with my family! Other activities for the weekend mornings would be cleaning, trying a new dish, or baking to indulge and catching up over a call with family and friends.

KD: Sunday - one will always ênd me in my own space - my home, spending time with my family. Sunday is one such day when personally I do not prefer to step out from my space and have family time including âMe timeö.

PT: On a Sunday morning you would ênd me spending time with Family / friends / working out.

RA: I am pretty old-school when it comes to the 6-day work week, so Saturday is basically a weekday for me. But Sundays are lazy - I sleep in, hangout with my daughter/husband, watch Bollywood movies, and cook, sometimes!
