

# An interview with Sairee Chahal: Founder, serial entrepreneur, and evangelist for women's role in nation building

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Sairee Chahal is a serial entrepreneur, mom, angel investor, and evangelist for #womensinternet. She currently runs SHEROES [1], an online ecosystem for women offering support, entrepreneurial and employment opportunities, content and community, and Mahila Money [2], a community neobank for women. Ms. Chahal also serves on the board of Milaan Foundation [3], Paytm Payments Bank [4] and US-based Women in Cloud [5]. An Aspen Leadership Fellow and a Braddock Scholar, she has been recognized for her achievements globally. Ms. Chahal is a winner of the Devi Award, the Femina Achievers Award, and the Cartier Award, has been selected as Editor's choice for L'Oreal Femina Women's Award and has been listed in Business Today's Most Powerful Women in Indian Business. MIT SPR spoke to Ms. Chahal about female entrepreneurship and policies to promote women in the business and technology sectors.

**Science Policy Review:** What has been your motivation to become an entrepreneur, and creating a women's only network especially when primary social media channels have been gaining traction?

**Sairee Chahal:** I never thought I would be a tech entrepreneur. I come from a regular service class family; my father kept the same job for like 40 years. Around that time, the best hopes a parent from that time had for the children was, especially the ones who didn't go study science from premier universities, to become a bureaucrat or an academic. My roots are in a small town in Punjab, and my parents still live there. But I got a little lucky! I got interested in tech and in 1999, I was the first person on a team of a tech company, experiencing the whole journey, literally from idea on a paper napkin to exit.

Growing up I saw women in my family, all super educated [and] full of potential, but no agency. They were invisible in their families. Most women I went to high school dropped off from the workforce by the time we all hit 30. It was very clear that, not only are we a gender poor country, as per the



Figure 1: Sairee Chahal.

World Economic Forum or World Bank Index [6], but it was all over. One doesn't need to look at an academic report to infer that. My work is just built on these two core insights - technology is a massive enabler and women are not getting seats on the table. I left home when I was 17 and got my first work assignment. I think by the time I was 18, that sense of independence and this idea that there's much more in the world than me has always been at the core of how I've sort of looked at things.

My inspiration for SHEROES came from the movements like Amul, self help groups and cooperative microfinance institutions that have existed in India. This social network has always existed, it's just not technology backed - it's not on blockchain or layers of any sort. So we didn't design it. I think we just codified it. The first version of the network was just the jobs and careers community; literally one tiny community of women caring about their careers, trying to get back to work, trying to look for flexible work and then sort of going from there.

So it started with one community. Then it became a platform only for communities and for women. The interesting hook for us was, and again, an inspiration from the offline communities and networks - women only. Culturally, "women only" is a thing in India, and in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and maybe LATAM, and I think that's the unique filter we applied; where, safe space for women is an offline thing, but we brought it online.

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***“Sometimes you look for ideas and sometimes ideas look for you.”***

**SPR:** You mentioned these communities have existed for a long time and that were able to bring in a technology layer. What are the insights that you are able to draw from building this network?

**SC:** The biggest insight is that when you're a woman offline, everybody has the right to your life. In India, women get questioned for everything - food, clothing, going out, etc. But for a woman with a mobile device, this is her device. The agency has increased multifold. If you walk into an average home, most people either have a device that belongs to them or want one. We have about 25 million women as part of our community, and they want to connect, are aspirational, highly creative and are entrepreneurial. There are interesting insights we've identified from the community.

The need for safety is a very big ask. A lot of people told us “you are shrinking your market size by limiting it to women,” but that fundamentally dilutes the value we offer to this user. One of the most unique things we do is we run a free counseling helpline. It doesn't make business sense rationally, but it is our way to tell our community, “We care. This is a safe space. This is a place of trust. And these are things that are important to us.”

India is undergoing this massive wave of aspiration. You know, like India, there's a line मैं कुछ करना चाहती हूँ (“I want to do something”). So cutting across demographics, age and class divide, this one common thing that binds all of the work we do. Women have this aspiration, to be recognized, to be independent, to be part of the new technology. That's the hunger we found in them.

**SPR:** Could you share some specifics into this insight, how are the demographics? What topics women discuss or activities they do on the platform?

**SC:** Our users are more rural than urban, about 20-30% in the metros but mostly in peri-urban areas. They are between the age of 21 to 45, are graduates, most of them are married, of which most have children. They're in small towns where jobs aren't as much or as safe, this segment comes to us a lot. Interestingly, having a child is strangely another form of freedom. I think married women with children are given a lot more freedom, sort of like they've done their job. So now they want to do more; most of these women file for loan applications to buy a smartphone or a laptop.

We are actually an entrepreneurial country, more women are entrepreneurial than men because there's still more men in the informal workforce than women. Within SHEROES, beauty and related sectors are massive, they are the biggest forms of micro-entrepreneurship. They've gone mobile thanks to salon-in-a-box kind of things. Tailoring is also a big segment, followed by online sales and reselling, and then comes institutions and teaching and any form of skills. Then there

are some of these creative things like yoga and arts.

Career and entrepreneurship continue to be a big area of interest. There's a community called love, sex, relationships - one of our most popular and continues to be. Then there's a community for legal rights, which is very, very popular. A lot of the conversations around, rights of women and marriages and inheritance, safety rights and things like that are discussed regularly. In terms of creativity, I was myself very surprised when I first saw this, that - everybody writes or they're singing, or they create something. I guess it's a way to literally cope with the conditions of being a woman in this country.

[For] a lot of women, before they come on the network, they've never set up a blog or they've never made an Instagram reel, but once they find that confidence, they go out and do these things a lot more. Of course, the other community that we find fun is cooking. Because most women cook in India, it's never recognized. Here we see non-instagrammable food pictures, like your dal chawal or rajma. These are taken for granted every day in their homes, but when another woman posts an aloo paratha photo, she gets appreciation because the rest of them know what it takes to keep the house running, and keep the kitchen running. And it's a thankless job. So at least there's some appreciation here.

***“Women have this aspiration, to be recognized, to be independent, to be part of the new technology. That's the hunger we found in them.”***

**SPR:** You mentioned, most people take these loans for smartphones and devices. As a country, from a financial perspective, we have a massive banking infrastructure, yet access to finance is a challenge. What were those gaps that made you understand that this is a problem?

**SC:** We are still a country where only 9% of women have formal work [7], which means the rest of these women are basically looking for different ways to make incomes. These women are not recognized by government schemes, so she's beyond microfinance, and not big enough for a bank - stuck in the middle. Most women in India don't have inheritance or assets. So how do they get collateral-free loans as a micro solopreneur business? She doesn't want to go to her husband because that just complicates her relationship with him and then just puts her in a lower hierarchy than she already is. We call them productive loans.

A woman came to us with a request for a washing machine loan, which comes under consumer goods or white goods loan. When we asked her why she wanted this, she said, “Ma'am, it takes me two hours to wash loads as I live in a joint family. If I buy this washing machine, I want to use those two hours for my business.” So now, you see how it changes, right? The whole context changes because she wants to take out that two hours and put it back into her business. So she's buying more time with the washing machine. A lot of our work

is around that, like one woman who wants to do more.

A woman who runs a coaching business reached out, that she wanted to buy a cooler, which was a heavy duty one. Her reason, "It would help my students study better." Another one took a loan and learned poultry farming; she's now onto a third loan and actually runs a poultry farm. [With] a lot of these stories, the idea is to help women be on their feet, help them continue to grow, continue to support the entrepreneurial kind. Today she's taking the loan as a solopreneur, chances are she could be employing 10 people by the end of the year. So to us, that's where we want to put our money and we are doing more of the same.

**"We need institutions who are very focused on the purpose, and we need great technology backing them up."**

**SPR: What challenges do you see largely faced by women entrepreneurs from a government policy perspective?**

**SC:** A lot of banks can't underwrite loans for these women because they're all thin filed. They've never taken out a loan, they don't have income slips, they probably don't have a PAN card. So they have nothing to prove that they're in business. India has only a very small taxpayer base [8]. How do we lend to people [who are] not in the taxpayer base? I think that's a large enough problem statement. I think the regulation will always be two steps behind the reality. It follows it and [does] not precede it. So in some ways I think a lot of creative solutioning has to be partnered. So both the technology companies and the regulator need to sit down [and] say, "what is pragmatic for us?"

We need institutions who are very focused on the purpose, and we need great technology backing them up. If we want to encourage women entrepreneurs, we should tell them, just go set up shop; no GST (Goods and Services Tax) for five years. It will just make a lot of women do this. A lot of women don't get into business because they draw accounts and then their husbands get involved. I think one of the policy interventions should be to keep husbands out of this whole picture.

Also, if you are a profitable, small business in the vicinity of INR 2-5 million you are actually [one of] the most stuck segment because there's nobody battling for you, the micro SME (Small and Medium Enterprise). You have overheads and similar regulatory framework that a large business has. So I think we need to ease up a little bit. For example, setting up a food business should be a lot easier. There are a lot more women who, like their counterparts in Europe and Thailand, will set up a little kiosk or will set up a little cafe.

The Skilling Ministry only does skilling. So it's not gender filtered and the Ministry of Commerce has too much going on for them to have a gender. So, India doesn't have a focus on women's entrepreneurship at a policy level. So maybe we should set up something on that side.

**SPR: There's a lot more we can achieve if such insights and hard data is presented for policy making. How can technology players like you engage with policy makers or the government to bring about this policy change? How can we establish a hand-in-glove partnership?**

**SC:** Founders like me are equally guilty. I think a lot of our approach when we were building was to stay away from the government because the assumption was that they are slow and the truth is, the government is a massive machinery in such a large country. I think founders like us are very entrenched in our businesses, and running a business in India is no easy task. You're mostly fighting fire, so you don't have time to think about these things, but the truth is at least some of us should.

I think technology companies and governments need to engage a lot more in exchange of ideas. We also need some of these innovations to happen from inside the government. Like Amit Ranjan went in and built Digilocker, because of which the whole country uses it. We need more like him, doing interesting projects for this country and we have so many interesting problems to solve. So I think that cross pollination of talent is very important. The distance between where innovation is and where policies are, needs to be reduced completely.

We are a diverse country, it's hard to please people, and there's always somebody who's unhappy with the outcome, but I do think there is genuine interest in building real solutions for real people at scale. So I just feel we all need to make better efforts. No matter where you stand, left, right or center, I think the economic interests of a large number of people, of communities and of sustainable development should always be at heart.

These are our north stars and we should not forget them at any point in time.

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