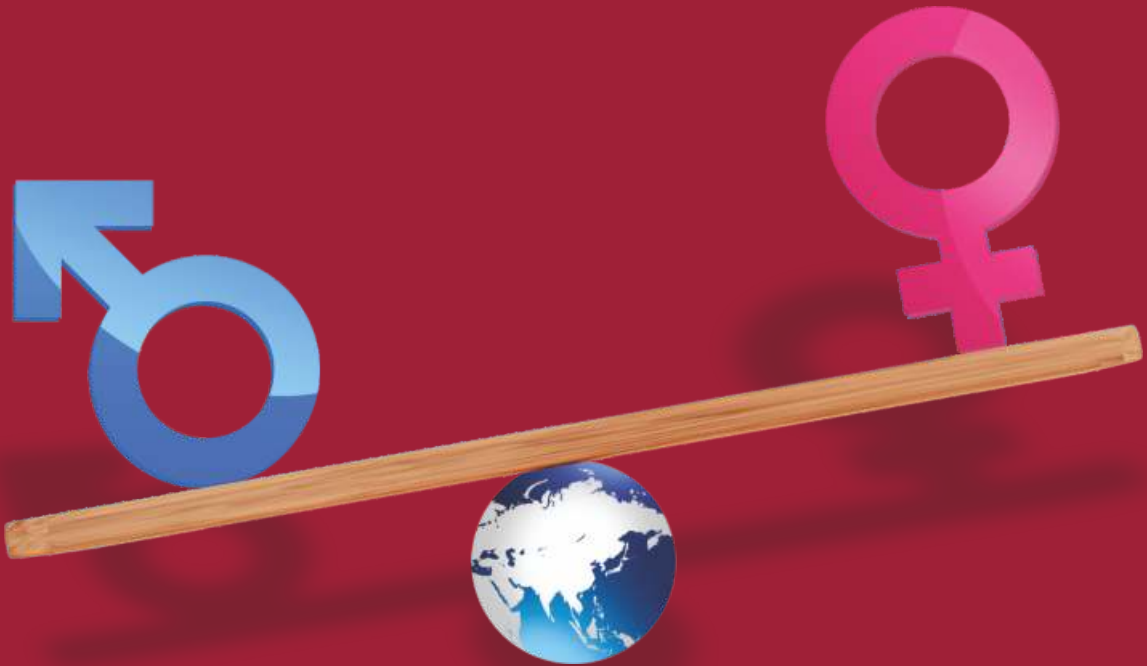


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# Revival and Growth of Institutions – A Social Entrepreneur’s Trial



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“Shashank Tripathi of Jagriti Yatra says “women are balance-sheet builders, while men are focused on profit and loss” .”

A woman's work, it is said, is never done. With more women in the workplace and without them being able to reduce responsibilities at home, this statement is even more applicable now. For social entrepreneurs who build their own enterprise, the responsibility to see opportunity in every challenge is almost an imperative for success. For women social entrepreneurs, success is achieved when it is holistic – holistic because the work at home and work outside home are rarely separated in women's cognitive and emotional state of being or relationships. This is why women's efforts for society are 'built to last'.

And so it was with my journey as a social entrepreneur. I came into this role as CEO of NGO called Udyogini that was on the verge of being closed due to a funds crunch and little motivation to carry on among its few employees. In the private sector in India, a similar scenario would

characterize the company as 'sick', and there are many examples of 'sick' companies being turned around by motivated and committed CEOs. When I was offered the responsibility of turning Udyogini around, I took it on with a strong belief that it should not be allowed to cease without even a fight and without some substantial effort made to revive and grow it. This was also a personal cause because Udyogini had been implementing an innovative, pioneering, medium scale program for microenterprise management training for assetless rural women in India which was funded by the World Bank and conceptualized and monitored by me and my team while I was working at the World Bank. The program was done in partnership with local NGOs that worked with such women so the NGOs also got trained in microenterprise to be able to sustain the program over the long term. Decidedly, there were many 'firsts' for Udyogini – venturing into a field like microenterprise training when even microfinance was new; working with local NGO partners when partnerships were not part of the vocabulary of development that it is today; and sustainability for the long-term through such partnerships at a time when sustainability was just starting to gain traction as a concept and practice. Udyogini had built a good reputation for quality program implementation and learning. Once the program closed, however, funds could not be mobilized to sustain it and build on the good work.

The initial years as CEO were challenging as I had no experience of running an institution much less try to revive one that was about to close! Other challenges were that I was living and working abroad for many years and had lost touch with my college or professional network that most leaders tap for support. Most NGO leaders were in any case alumni of professional rural or corporate management institutions in India (which I was not since my academic discipline for higher studies was, Political Science). They were able to network through those connections. There were also not many woman founders/CEOs of non-profits at the time (even if there were, I did not know them anyway) so it was a trial by fire in a male-dominated leadership landscape! Solo leadership requires grit because it is a lonely journey and I had wished many times that I had found another professional, equally committed to institution revival, who could be a sounding board and provide emotional support. It is probably for similar reasons that, for start-ups today, many mentors suggest that the entrepreneur get a co-founder even if the journey starts solo.

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Revival can be more painful than starting a new institution. I always say it is like renovating an old house (where some residue of the old infrastructure remains to cause problems later) rather than pulling it down and laying the foundation again. Parts of the foundation of Udyogini were strong in terms of knowledge products, training curriculum and materials on microenterprise management for poor women as it was a first-of-its-kind program for generating such resources in a nascent field. But other parts like qualified human resources that had been there before, were no longer available to shape for high performance. So, the early years in Udyogini were spent in foundation building work and in managing expectations of the CEO – from the NGO community, the governing board and the donors. It was fortunate that Udyogini did pioneering work during the World Bank funded program which gave it the intrinsic merit and standing to be considered worthy of institutional revival.

The accumulated reputational dividend and rebuilding efforts helped Udyogini over the next many years. As CEO, I slowly gained many supporters and felt less alone at the top. What is very gratifying is not just having revived and grown an institution, but receiving some significant awards for the work done in the course of my tenure. Many knowledge resources created during this time are still being requested and cited. I moved on as CEO many years ago but Udyogini sustains and grows even when I am not at the helm. This is, surely, the ultimate reward!

I continue to use my learnings in Udyogini to shape the gender and entrepreneurship work with other institutions that I am now part of; learnings that need to reshape or shift the lens on how we approach women and their aspirations in Tier 3 and 4 districts of India in a setting that is in flux at an unprecedented speed, especially given the power of technology. The globalization of markets that was celebrated for the opportunities for poverty-alleviation and growth has been disrupted at all levels and not just because of the pandemic, but also politics and geopolitics. When globalization was at its peak, women and their work needs were chasing global markets but their capabilities did not keep pace. Aggregate analysis has generally showed how women were being left behind. My learnings now underlie my belief that with the understanding of how globalization may have precipitated environmental problems that are

urgent and compelling to solve, women will need to be at the forefront of actions of the future like climate because they are holistic in their thinking and conservationists for the well-being of their families and local ecosystem.

We need to look at this unique perspective of ‘the whole’ that women bring in society. As Shashank Tripathi of Jagriti Yatra says “women are balance-sheet builders, while men are focused on profit and loss” Women in rural India with whom Udyogini worked were balance sheet builders in the care and enterprise workspace in and outside the home to maintain equilibrium in their social ecosystem. As a woman social entrepreneur, I too always saw myself as a balance sheet builder and in Udyogini it meant taking everyone along in a participatory way and building incrementally rather than rapidly – focused on novel discoveries and learnings to transfer to other institutions as we developed the resources. This is how Udyogini’s work scaled to many parts of India and the world (its curriculum and microenterprise training materials were used by local government, NGOs and community institutions in World Bank projects in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe). This participation and partnership approach to addressing development issues has now been termed ‘whole of society’ approach (OECD, WHO, UN-SDGs).

Women’s balance sheet building capability is an embedded value so women are the most appropriate resource for the ‘whole of society’ perspective and action (taking everyone along and building bridges within and with institutions like family, community, public officials and elected representatives, market players). Women in localities already use this approach and in rural areas they are the practitioners of sustainable agriculture. They are encouraged and supported by the NGOs who integrate government, market and local resources to scale women’s practice and models of ‘building to last’ across many geographies. Participation, partnership and perspective has been rooted and driven by women in sustaining local ecosystems. For young entrepreneurs, it is important to understand how this has worked and will continue to work because it is holistic. Compartmentalized initiatives are being rethought globally and none too soon.

