



UNITEE had the opportunity to interview Madi Sharma, a New European entrepreneur, and founder of *Madi Group*, on her entrepreneurial journey and her advocacy of gender equality and women entrepreneurship.

**You are an inspiration to many people who would like to start or have just started their own business. Looking back, what triggered your entrepreneurial spirit? Did your migrant background play a significant role in the development of this spirit?**

You are only an inspiration if the people that you are supposed to be inspiring make the change. What triggered my entrepreneurial spirit was I had nowhere to go, there was nothing I could do. I became an entrepreneur out of necessity. I had no choice. What I did was look at my options. I had no qualifications, no skills, no training, and have two kids. I had to find something I can do around them.

My background being from the Indian sub-continent, there are millions of women who are in a worse situation than I was in. How do they make a living? By selling vegetables and samosas on the street. That is how I started, making samosas and selling them to shops, because I thought if women in India could do it, so could I.

My multicultural background, having come from all over the spectrum, is where I get my diverse thinking. There are different models of starting a business from all over the world, which I try and apply.

**What is the biggest challenge in doing business? How do you run yours?**

The biggest challenge is that business is no longer done ethically. We are concentrating so much on profit that we end up making a lot of mistakes. We are forgetting about people and the planet. Also, we are forgetting about partnerships we can build that would give us sustainability. That is what I am trying to bring back in my business.

I try to do businesses in an ethical way, with a long-term holistic vision. When you see what is all around you, you will notice that by building a small business in the middle of your environment, you can help create jobs, purchase products and services from other local businesses, and put money back into the local economy, thus empowering people and fostering growth of local economies. If you do this, that economy becomes stronger as people become empowered. This is Corporate Social Responsibility. It is not a marketing tool, it is not words in the annual statement. It is something we practice and live by.

The other thing that we, in *Madi Group*, are trying to do is value human capital. MADI stands for *Make A Difference Ideas*. It is about empowering people to make those differences, to make those changes they want to see. We value people. We employ without CVs. We have no clocking in and out. We have no set holidays. If you do not want to come to work tomorrow, you do not come to work tomorrow. The work can wait.

When we do have important work, it always gets done because the team works together and understands how important it is for the company. If you value human capital, you have all the people's innovative ideas. I genuinely know nothing. People around me know what I do not know. By empowering them and utilising their brilliant minds, I managed to make my company great. That is why we employ people of different backgrounds from different parts of the world because each of them brings something different to the company.

**Aside from being an entrepreneur, you are an advocate of different issues and active in various NGOs in and outside Europe. What triggered your social engagement?**

Gandhi is my hero. You must be the change you want to see. But my real-life role models are women who clean toilets. I love to go to a clean toilet. They are doing a job which nobody else wants to do. Nobody ever says thank you to them. They can be the leaders of real social change but they never get appreciated.

I am a social capitalist. Once you create profit, you then have a choice of what you want to do with it. My choice is to use that profit to see the changes that I want to happen: educating girls, empowering women, creating more entrepreneurs, inclusive diversity, and more empathy; all things I am really passionate about. If I got a day job and was not making any profit, I would not be able to do something to achieve these changes.

**Immigration and a New European workforce can have a considerably positive effect on the performance of European businesses and economies. How can other New European entrepreneurs be more involved and active in the life of their country of residence?**

It is simple: find out what your vested interest is. In my case it is helping more women and entrepreneurs for my vested interest is on the future of my grandson. I do not want him to live in a world like ours. I want to make a change, and I start doing this at the lowest level possible and in my own way. Each one of us has the ability to make a change. The problem is people often believe they cannot make a difference.

We need people from other countries. They have the talents, the skills; they bring diversity which we do not have. This is a good business opportunity. We can take that same model and put it anywhere in Europe.

Diversity brings different kinds of thinking. It brings different opportunities and different skills. It also brings new markets. If I employ you and you are of another ethnicity and speak another language, you might know a different work process to the way that I am doing and this gives me the opportunity to get into new markets.

The most number of SMEs that were created amid the financial crisis have been by migrant women. This just shows that migrants are adding real economic benefits and we have to value them. I do not understand why more and more politicians and people in Europe are seeing it as a bad thing.

**What are your suggestions on how to best tackle the pay gap and to improve women representation in leading positions? How can Women on Boards make the difference in the growth of businesses?**

I am for targeted objectives like the Women on Boards legislation, but I am against quotas. However, ultimately, we are going to need them to make the change because we cannot go on like this and men cannot go on taking leading positions. The issue here is fear.

The example that was given by Mr Lombardini, then Human Rights Commissioner, during a conference I attended on why terrorists are frightened of women: if you educate a girl, you educate the community in a whole different way. You educate the next generation. You change the policies. Men have this fear that they are going to lose control of the power that they have. It is not an argument of men versus women.

When there is an increase on the number of women on boards, Corporate Social Responsibility spent increases. Return on investment, profitability and productivity increases. The question is why are we not putting more women on boards? All the evidence stacks up for the benefits.

**Should breaking the glass ceiling be a priority in the European Union? What benefits and challenges can be perceived in pursuing this?**

There is no glass ceiling. First of all, women stop themselves. We do not put our names forward. We wait for something to happen instead of making things happen.

If there is a glass ceiling, we have to make sure that this glass ceiling is removed. The only way we can remove this ceiling is to have transparency. We could achieve this by encouraging the men to understand what women have to go through, strictly business speaking.

Glass ceiling, career labyrinth, concrete ceiling, etc. These are just terms and labels. If you keep telling women there is a glass ceiling, they will keep thinking that in any minute, shards of glass will hit their heads.