

FOCUS

The Next Indian Women Inc

In the run-up to the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day on March 8, *FE* catches up with a new generation of women entrepreneurs, who are making a mark by cashing in on the women's market in the country



ILLUSTRATION: SHYAM

signed for women. For example, mobile hair dryers, full-length mirrors and magnifying glasses for make-up are a must. Butlers are even trained about local markets, particularly to help guide visitors in shopping of local ethnic attire, artifacts, jewellery, and even to enable tailoring of garments at short notice.

Indian hotels are not the only ones offering women only floors. Such accommodation is also available in Dubai's Jumeirah Emirates Towers, and Tamani Hotels; Shanghai's Four Points by Sheraton, and St Regis, and Hong Kong's Fleming.

The trend of women entrepreneurs targeting women markets is not only confined to middle or upper socio-economic segments in metros only, but is also spreading at the grassroots in suburbs. The Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank or Mann Deshi Bank is a cooperative bank run by women and for women in Maharashtra. Founded by Chetna Gala Sinha in 1997 with a start-up share capital of \$15,000, the bank has more than 100,000 clients with a repayment rate of 98% and its assets added up to more than \$6,800,000 last year on the back of loan, saving and pension instruments.

Similarly, Gwalior-based *Mahila Pakshi* is by women, for women and of women. Though the idea was conceived by a man, Rupesh Srivastava, it was given shape by his wife Asha Lata and young daughter Samanvaya Kumar. Today, it has about 150 female contributors from all over India, including 60 from Gwalior, who use the newspaper as a vehicle to highlight issues pertinent to them. It is operating more within a rights-based framework.

Editor Samanvaya Kumar says, "It is more a social initiative than a commercial venture. It's women's citizen journalism in the print medium." The publication doesn't claim to represent women, but gives them a platform to voice their concerns and champion their own causes, adds her father, who is the only male associated with the venture. The publication has more than 12,500 buyers at ₹ 2 issue price. Advertisements are published only if these are gender sensitive.

Of course, then there are women's only trade organisations like Ficci Ladies Organisation set up by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). FLO seeks to promote entrepreneurship and professional excellence among women entrepreneurs, professionals and corporate executives. Headquartered in Delhi, it has offices in Mumbai, Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Guwahati and Kolkata.

It's not only women who are tapping the ever growing market of women. Whether it's a small online resource like Naukriforwomen.com or a behemoth like SBI, which has opened women's only bank branch Vasundhara in Lucknow, entrepreneurs and institutions are unleashing a trend that is showing the promise of metamorphosing from a trickle into a wave.

Rajiv Tikoo

WOMEN'S ENTERPRISE is set to define the world of business. After notching up successes in male dominated businesses, women have started cashing in on women's market. So, you have businesses run by women and for women. Their successes are all the more important because they have come despite a largely dismal picture of women's development indicators in the country—whether one looks at a very basic figure of sex ratio since the first International Women's Day was celebrated in 1911 or contemporary comparison of development indicators in South Asia (see accompanying graphics).

Going beyond socialite women designing jewellery, clothes or interiors for celebrity spouses of rich businessmen or self-made businesswomen tapping an obvious women's beauty care and lingerie products market, the new women enterprise is more focused on cab services, travel agencies and hotel facilities for upwardly women. Apart from enterprising individuals, even big business houses have jumped on to the women only bandwagon. Though the preferred locations are metros like Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, such women's enterprises are taking root even in cities

like Gwalior and Pune.

The reasons are compelling. Women are the world's largest and fastest growing market. With an annual consumer spending power worth \$20 trillion, including annual earnings of \$13 trillion, women are globally a bigger market than China and India put together, according to Michael J Silverstein and Kate Sayre of The Boston Consulting Group. Saying that women are not satisfied with today's products and services because companies don't appreciate their problems and falter to offer solutions, the authors have been advising companies to come up with women-centric products to avail of a lifetime business opportunity in ever growing women's economy. Their observations and recommendations are based on a survey of 12,000 women in 22 countries, including in India.

In India, the business of mobility is the preferred space for women's initiatives. It has been bred more by necessity than by choice. For example, women's safety is a prime concern in most parts of the country and a woman's cab service was only waiting to take off. Initially launched in Mumbai, For-She cabs also runs in Delhi and plans are afoot to expand to other cities like Kolkata, Hyderabad, Pune, Bangalore and Chennai. Even a division of premium cab service for corporate clients has followed. The company, For-She Travels

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and Logistics Private Limited (FTL), has its focus on training aspiring women drivers. While they have been sponsoring the training of some candidates with the help of the Indian Merchant Chambers and Bharat Petroleum, other needy candidates are being directed to a microfinance institution, Bandhan Finance. A tie-up is also in place with an Israeli security solutions provider to offer self-defence training to women to help them cope with unforeseen situations. Alka Saxena, chief executive officer, says, "We hope our initiatives will go a long way in realising not only our dream of empowering women, but also the dream of other women in India to leap ahead." Pro-

moted by entrepreneur Revathi Roy, the company has on its board eminent people like IL&FS CMD Arun K Saha and Magsaysay award winner Kiran Bedi.

Seeing women on the go, women-only travel agencies like Women On Wanderlust (WOW), which was founded by travel writer Sumitra Senapaty, too have been quick to tap the opportunity. Such travel groups help a woman to break out in the company of fellow women travellers or to shrug off the obligation to wait for that elusive family vacation. In fact, in many cases, it's the man himself making queries and booking for his friend or wife.

More importantly, such groups lay as much emphasis on women's safety as on their preferences on art & culture, cuisine and shopping. Going beyond stereotypes, the focus is also on soft adventure like cruises and safaris. Women with a taste for hard adventure would not need the services of such groups anyway! While shorter trips are usually confined to India, the longer ones take women with time and money abroad. WOW claims to be growing 100% year-on-year, with about 700 customers last year. Women travellers come in all ages from 28 to 65. They can be working women, single or housewives. Most of them come from Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai.

WOW is not alone and it has for company and competition Piya

Bose's Girls On The Go, Shireen Mehra's Women On Clouds, Veena Patil's Kesari-My Fair Lady, and Asmeeta Jacob's Travel Smart. Senapaty says, "We have been able to inspire some overseas operators, too, and we provide services regularly to two such women travel groups."

The next link in the chain of cab services and travel agencies is the hotel accommodation. Women have the choice to stay on at women only hotel floors in many cities. For example, the Eva rooms at ten properties of the ITC-Welcomgroup Hotels are managed by female staff, ranging from female security staff to female butlers. A hotel group spokeswoman says, "There has been a perceptible rise in women travellers over the past decade."

It's a little wonder then that the hotel group is constantly engaged in enhancing the experience of business women travellers. At its newest property, ITC Royal Gardenia in Bangalore, a woman traveller has individual elevator access. Only women with a room card key can take an elevator to the Eva Floor. Once inside the room, at any of the hotel properties, an interactive doorbell helps the guest to view the calling visitor from her seat. A visitor is anyway accompanied by a lady staff member.

The hotel group gives attention to providing in-room amenities and other personal care products de-



Women On Wanderlust tourists in Kenya



Samanvaya Kumar of Mahila Paksh



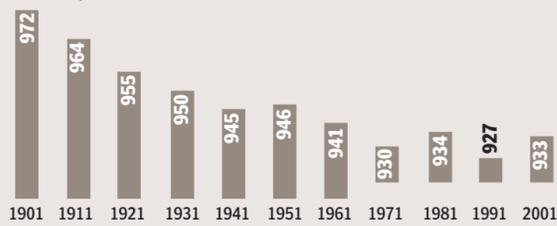
For-She staffers



An Eva room at ITC-Welcomgroup

Sex ratio, India: 1901 - 2001

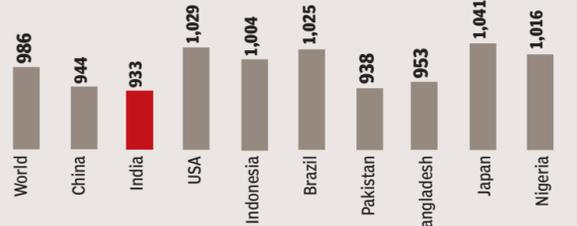
Females per 1,000 males



Source: Census of India, 2001

Sex ratio of selected countries

Females per 1,000 males



Source: World Population Prospects, United Nations

Monitoring goals

	Infant mortality Total per 1,000 live births	Life expectancy M/F	Maternal mortality ratio	% Illiterate (>15 years) M/F	Births per 1,000 women ages 15-19
Bangladesh	41	65.8 / 68.1	570	40.0 / 50.2	72
India	52	62.9 / 66.0	450	24.8 / 49.2	68
Nepal	38	66.6 / 68.2	830	28.9 / 54.6	101
Pakistan	61	66.9 / 67.5	320	33.2 / 60.0	46
Sri Lanka	15	70.8 / 78.2	58	7.8 / 10.9	30

Source: The State of World Population, 2010