

# women TOP50<sup>®</sup>

Cover Story

## *Embracing* Womanhood Yet Beyond **the Archetype**

- Rishini Weeraratne

VOLUME 08 | ISSUE 01

OCTOBER 2022

Retail Price 500.00

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## **The Breakout Star Making History**

- Melanie Janine Kanaka

*A Life of  
Service in a*  
**Continuous**  
Journey of Learning

- Dr. Lalitha Kutti Krishnan Nair

**An**  
**Empowering**  
*Journey*  
- Esra Kivrak

*The Ball's*  
in Her Court and  
**She's Up for**  
**The Challenge**

- Aishath Nazima

*A Story*  
**Worth Telling**  
- Sam Fernando



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**JUNE, 2023**  
COLOMBO, SRI LANKA



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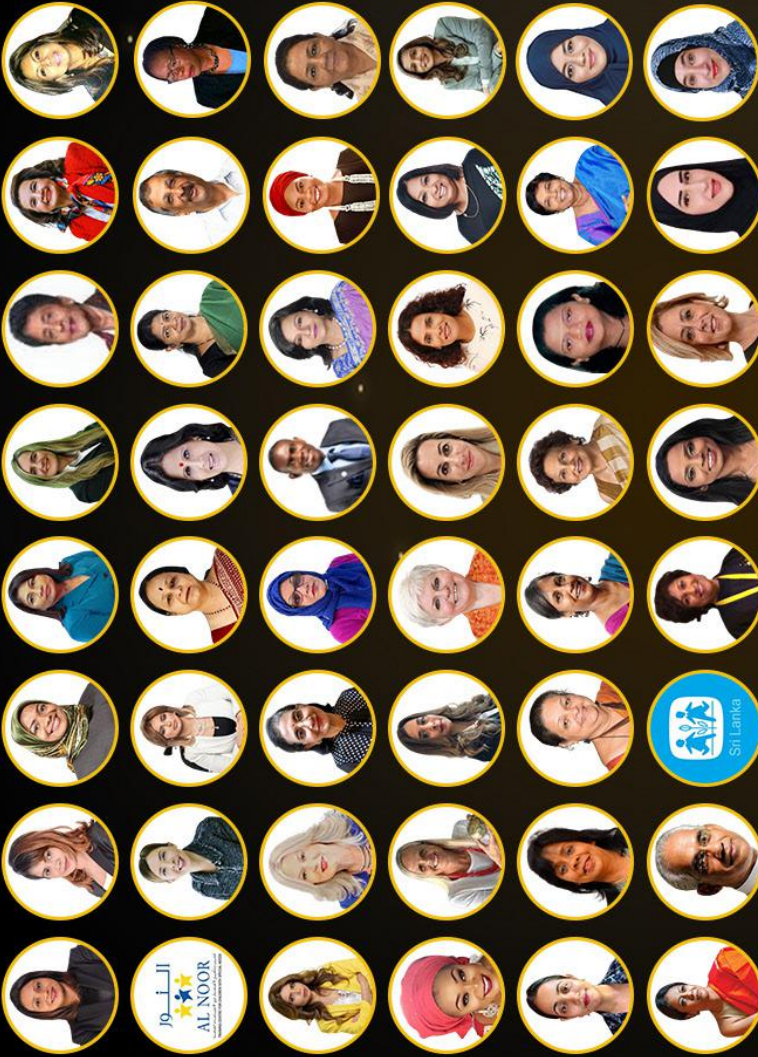
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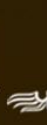


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# PANEL OF JUDGES 2022





October 2022

## Welcome to the October Issue of Women Top50 Magazine

Can you believe it? We almost survived the COVID 19 Pandemic. Most of you by now will be preparing for Christmas and the holidays, planning parties, get-togethers with family & friends. Do not forget to share your blessings with the needy.

In a world of expectations, strong view points, extreme judgments and righteous beliefs, women can struggle to know themselves, find themselves and be themselves. The pressure to please others, be liked by others, look good for others, take care of others and perform for others is killing the souls of far too many women.

I dedicate the October issue to all the women who Raise the Bar to become the best self and embracing the success of other women rather than be threatened by it. Happy women let go of those people who hold you back, who drag

you down or who leave you feeling bad about yourself. They surround themselves with those who will pull you to rise.

Well on that note, Take your place in this world and stop buying into the crap it's beneath you and not serving you. When women rise, it forces our entire world to rise.

Inspire yourself

*Sulochana Segera*

**Dr. Sulochana Segera**  
Chief Editor/Brand Owner

## Women Top50 and Youth on the Move

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<b>Printing</b>	: Neo Graphic
<b>Published by</b>	: Women in Management(Pvt) Ltd L2-4 Realty Plaza, Ja-Ela Sri Lanka

# New Generation Awards Committee 2022



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# An Empowering Journey

Defining herself as a transformative leader, Esra Kivrak from Turkey has been a relentless learner unafraid to extend her boundaries. And that character has seen her succeed through a colorful career in the banking industry spanning three decades. She attributes her transition to a different industry as the CEO of two quick-service restaurant chains in Turkey to her immense knowledge of the different sectors of banking. A consultant at IFC, Esra is an expert in SME banking, having played an active role in women's banking projects in South Asia and the MENA region. Esra is also the vice-chair of WiLAT Turkey, passionately promoting gender balance in the transport and logistics industry while calling for government support and subsidies to spur women's entry and retention in the industry. Speaking to WIM Top50, Esra shared her experiences of a remarkable career that has contributed to women's empowerment, social prosperity, and economic growth in Turkey and beyond.

## Who is Esra Kivrak? Give us a brief background of yourself and your career.

I am the CEO of two quick-service restaurant chains in Turkey, namely PizzaLazza and Saloon Burger. It has been an exciting journey following 30 years of experience in the banking industry. P&L management, sales network management, SME segment management, customer value proposition design, management of different financial products, credit risk management, supply chain management, and digital transformation of the business were some of my responsibilities through the years.

Deep knowledge in different sectors as a banking professional and as the Head of an SME business line has been very helpful in starting a new career in a different industry.

I define myself as a transformative leader. I always dared to extend my boundaries by being a relentless learner and sharing this knowledge with others and I believe that's why I've been offered the role of consultant at IFC which is a member of the World Bank Group. Being an expert on SME Banking, I've had the opportunity to contribute to many SME banking and women's banking projects in South Asia and the MENA region.

I have a BA degree in political science from Bosphorus University and completed Executive Education at Wharton Business School/UPEN. I have also been leading women's banking in one of the pioneering banks in Turkey. The Women Entrepreneurship Program that we were running was one-of-a-kind not only in Turkey but also globally back then. I had the opportunity to work with women entrepreneurs and help them access finance, access to knowledge, and networks and also collaborate with NGOs to empower women in all areas of business.

**With significant experience in the SME sector, what is the significance**



### of SMEs in the Turkish economy?

SMEs are the engines of the Turkish economy. There are more than 3.5 million SMEs in Turkey. They provide 70% of employment, 63% of revenue, 56% of production, 54% of value-added, and 59% of exports. Despite their high contribution to the economy, their share in total loans is only 26%. That is why access to finance and managing sustainable growth by being competitive in global markets has always been a priority for the SME segment. The entrepreneurial enthusiasm is high and adaptation to changes is fast in Turkey. Nevertheless, the share of women-owned businesses is low compared to the global average. Globally one in three businesses is owned by women, whereas in Turkey this ratio is one in ten businesses. These numbers indicate that encouraging women to be entrepreneurs is also a key to social prosperity and economic growth.

### What is the support that the government extends to the development of the SME sector?

Government support for SMEs has



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increased significantly in the last ten years. The important milestones include the establishment of the SME Development Agency, the introduction of portfolio guarantee schemes for SMEs by the Credit Guarantee Fund, and various subsidies and support mechanisms by different ministries. These mechanisms provide a plethora of support such as training, seminars for capacity building of SMEs, R&D support for global competitiveness and innovation, digitization and industry 4.0 support for efficiency, and participation support for global fairs, conventions, and EXPOs. Government support extends to providing insurance, collateral support, E-commerce, and E-trade support, and an SME consultancy system.

### How strong is the business environment in which SMEs in Turkey operate?

According to the ease of doing business index Turkey is 33rd among 190 economies. Due to and presence of a young population and our geolocation with the opportunity to integrate with global value chains, Turkey's potential to grow is high. Nevertheless, there

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**Unfortunately, transport and logistics are male-dominated sectors.**

**Traditionally women have not desired to work in this sector or own a business in this sector.**

**Therefore, the gender gap in this sector is more predominant compared to other sectors. Women’s employment in this sector is only nine percent globally, 26% in Turkey, and 59% in the OECD countries. Researches indicate that the required skill sets in the logistics and transport sector are time-management, problem-solving, multifunctionality, analysis, and managing customer relationships.**

are some adverse effects such as the increase in external dependence on production with high dependency on energy and high energy costs. There is also the negative impact of instabilities in neighboring countries to exports of SMEs, high cost of investments, difficulty in finding and affording qualified labor force, and lack of efficiency.

**As we know, traditionally the transport and logistics sectors are male-dominated. While enlightening us on the gender balance in Turkey in transport and logistics, in your opinion is the logistics and supply chain industry bad for women?**

Unfortunately, transport and logistics are male-dominated sectors. Traditionally women have not desired to work in this sector or own a business in this sector. Therefore, the gender gap in this sector is more predominant compared to other sectors. Women’s employment in this sector is only nine percent globally, 26% in Turkey, and 59% in the OECD countries. Researches indicate that the required

skill sets in the logistics and transport sector are time-management, problem-solving, multifunctionality, analysis, and managing customer relationships. Those are compatible with the skills that most women have, hence I think this sector needs to employ more women and keep women’s employment at higher rates by giving more opportunities to women.

**As the vice-chair of WiLAT Turkey, you occupy a privileged position of influence. What have you been able to do for the women in the sector and have you made your concerns known to the state/state agencies and other private players in the industry?**

A Women in Logistics and Transportation (WiLAT) survey in the first quarter of 2022 revealed several important insights from the responses of top-ranking professionals in this sector. Accordingly, the top reasons for the gap in women’s leadership in this sector are a male-dominant industry with a lack of women leadership role models, male

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**I feel blessed by my accomplishments, and that's why I've never suffered from job burnout. I am lucky to have a family who always supported me throughout my career. I raised two children and have been a caregiver for my parents and in-laws with the support of my spouse during the busiest phase of my career. With good planning, we shared our home responsibilities and did not stick to traditional roles.**

leaders supporting male employees in building their careers, employers not being in favor of women employees, and the resignation of young women following maternity leave for childcare.

Therefore, to improve gender balance there should be an increase in the visibility of women leaders in this industry. Their success stories should be shared in public to prove that there are role models for young women. Moreover, we should execute a gender strategy to empower women employees, such as flexible working hours or providing equal pay for equal work, and university and industry collaboration to conduct a mentorship program for women students and recruit more women graduates to maintain the balance in the long run.

The role of WiLAT is quite important as being the first NGO to articulate these

requirements in a press conference in March 2022. Industry, NGO, and university collaboration is a key enabler to reduce the gender gap in this sector. For sure overall government support or subsidies for women's employment will also have a positive effect.

**Occupying multiple positions that demand time and attention and performance, have you ever suffered from job burnout and decided that you needed a break? How do you balance work and home?**

I feel blessed by my accomplishments, and that's why I've never suffered from job burnout. I am lucky to have a family who always supported me throughout my career. I raised two children and have been a caregiver for my parents and in-laws with the support of my spouse during the busiest phase of my career. With good planning,

we shared our home responsibilities and did not stick to traditional roles.

**What do you feel about the recognition bestowed by WIM at the Top50 Global Awards? What has it meant to you personally, to your career, and to your country?**

I was thrilled to be nominated for and awarded by WIM. I am the first Turkish woman leader recognized by WIM with an award. I was surprised to be the recipient of the global award because I didn't expect a foreign organization to recognize my accomplishments. WIM is gaining more and more global visibility every year and creating a huge network of women who can collaborate and support each other in many ways. I believe each year nominations from Turkey for the WIM Top50 Global Awards will increase.

# Highlights of the Top50 Global Conference

organized by Women in Management in partnership with the Sri Lanka Business Council in the UAE and Equality Alliance UK held on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2022 in Dubai under the theme of “Resilience & Reinventions”





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# **E**mbracing Womanhood Yet Beyond the Archetype

**Rishini Weeraratne**

Head of Social Media at  
Wijeya Newspapers Limited



**Rishini Weeraratne**, Head of Social Media at Wijeya Newspapers Limited is a mishmash of many traits. She's no innocent maiden, more the wise woman who values deep knowledge and a yearning to cultivate inner peace. Her energy is evident in navigating the digital space in media, leading a young team of 40 individuals primarily below the age of 30 and predominantly female. Rishini's candid expressions make her interview with WIM Top50 interesting and provide food for thought. In an era when it's becoming more difficult to determine the definition of a woman amid attempts to stretch it, Rishini is rooting for women and their celebration. Taking things in stride amid the harassment from malicious, defamatory, and false articles, Rishini's success in leading an award-winning team has been transformative and helped change the narrative in her favor.

**Who is Rishini Weeraratne? Coy or daring? Spontaneous or calculating? Who is she in a nutshell?**

Shy but an extrovert. I enjoy my company but love being surrounded by close friends and family. I'm quiet in public, but a chatterbox in private. I will engage in conversation, argue and debate about a topic till the cows come home. Slightly OCD. Extremely organized, hence can't stand a mess, everything around me has to always be neat, will immediately unpack all my suitcases even after a tiring red-eye flight. A firm believer in karma. I'm fascinated with religion and go to the temple, kovil, and church weekly. I have read a translated version of the Quran, and currently learning Judaism. Struggle to keep to time, constantly running late. I'd find any excuse to travel. Driving is therapeutic, can't cook to save my soul, love kids, and would any day opt to live in a house with ten kids. I enjoy reading and writing, cinema and theatre, music, and events. Hate the outdoors, and you will never find me in a campsite, jungle, or on a long hike. I would rather follow a diet, than work out. Beach over mountains, dogs over cats, studied Law but work in Media.

**What is your exact role at Wijeya Newspapers Limited?**

I'm the Head of Social Media at Wijeya Newspapers Limited. My team

manages eight digital brands, namely, Daily Mirror Online, Lankadeepa Online, Tamil Mirror Online, Daily FT, Times Online, and HI!! Online, WNow Sinhala, and WNow English. We produce 52 weekly shows including award-winning shows such as, In Conversation with Hirushi Jayasena, Tell Tehani, Food for Thought, etcetera. Weekly shows include political talk shows, sports, entertainment, and so on. Daily video content includes Breaking News, Daily News RoundUp, International News RoundUp, etcetera. I'm also the Editor of The Weekend Online, Daily Mirror newspaper, and the author of two columns in the Daily Mirror newspaper - She Can and A Family Affair.

**What are the biggest challenges or the most challenging part of managing the online editions of several publications, and working in media?**

It amuses me how intelligent people assume you control every piece of content published simply because you work in the company holding a senior position. They don't realize that we are a team of over two-thousand five hundred employees working together daily and content is created by hundreds of in-house journalists, correspondents, content creators, and more individuals. We have deputy

editors, features editors, editors in chief, etcetera, managing the different editorials within the organization. Every department has a structure and a working mechanism. It's not a one-man show. Yet, there have been instances when despite there being a journalist's name attached to an article, individuals call me and argue over a particular interview or news story, assuming I am solely responsible. Dime a dozen times, I've had to patiently inform the callers that there is a name attached to the article hence their first point of contact to address any concerns should be with the journalist who has penned the article. If a reasonable response is not received then as step two, they can contact the Editor of the said publication. Failing, as a third option, they can establish communication with a senior member of the management. We have even shared social media posts highlighting the above options as this has been a recurring issue.

I've had to entertain calls from politicians and members of political families, who want certain stories edited or deleted from our platforms. When their request is denied, individuals affiliated with the opposition would accuse me of being biased toward the government, and individuals affiliated with the government would accuse me of being biased toward the opposition. It's a never-ending circus.

can be appreciated and applauded for their achievements singularly instead of having to share the stage with men, be it heterosexual, bisexual, transgender or gay.

Similarly, I also don't agree with transgender women being allowed to compete in women's sports as I believe it creates an unfair advantage for the competing transgender female athlete. It has been debated globally that transgender women have an unfair advantage over cisgender women in competitive sports due to sex differences in human physiology, and that these differences are not sufficiently reversed by transgender hormone therapies. Men are physically stronger than women and that has been scientifically proven for centuries. To make sports more inclusive, introduce a third category such as men, women, and transgender to compete on an even keel as men versus men, women versus women, and transgender versus transgender. I prefer if the Women in Management Top50 Career and Professional Women's Awards can remain as a platform that recognizes and applauds successful women.

**Is winning an award more important for women than for men because the general idea is that women have to work harder than their male counterparts to get to a certain place?**

Men have patted each other on the back for centuries. It's still very much a boys club out there be it in the corporate world, politics, media, sport, or entertainment. Women continue to be paid less and occupy fewer seats on boards. Women have



**Assessing the rise of social media over traditional print media, what do you think will be the future of the latter? After all, a screen cannot replace a newspaper in hand with a nice cup of tea to start the day, right?**

In Sri Lanka, as the growth of digital media is still relatively slow compared to the rest of the world, the newspaper certainly has a good couple more decades to rule. Gen Y, Z, and Alpha consume news primarily online, Baby Boomers and Gen X prefer the traditional form of media, that is, newspapers. But eventually, over time, it will all be digital. Technology is rapidly changing the world. An iPad with a freshly brewed cup of tea in hand is equally appealing, is it not?

**When WIM went global with its conference and awards in June this year it was a massive departure from its original standpoint. WIM embraced inclusiveness and**

**opened its awards to the LGBTIQ+ community and more. As an individual who embraces inclusivity what are your thoughts on this departure? Do you think WIM should stick to its original program of being an exclusive awards platform for women?**

Yes, after all, WIM does stand for Women in Management. For centuries women have been discriminated against, identified, and treated as second-class citizens. Women have had to fight for their basic rights, and work tirelessly to earn their seats at the table and have their voices heard. I know this may not be a popular response, but as much as I support LGBTIQ+ rights and I truly believe in equality of all irrespective of race, religion, class, caste, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, I prefer if women, be it heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian,

to work twice as hard to be seen or heard. Even when they achieve success, they are often belittled with false accusations. An ambitious woman is portrayed as being power-hungry. A female CEO is likely to be labeled a 'tough b\*t\*h' or a 'corporate psychopath' or worse will be ridiculed with whispers of sexual favors being exchanged for that seat at the table. Hence, yes, it's important that women get highlighted for their contributions and applauded for their success. Women should dominate more headlines, be featured more, be spoken about more loudly, and be celebrated and cheered on at every given opportunity.

### **What has been your experience?**

I have been harassed, cyberbullied, and blackmailed by gossip sites that have published malicious, defamatory, false articles and in turn have demanded money in exchange for the deletion of the same, and more. Hence, to me personally, winning awards have been an important career highlight as it has helped me change the narrative. In Sri Lanka, no matter how inaccurate a narrative is, and even if there is ample evidence to prove so otherwise, most people prefer to believe anything negative especially when it's about a woman. I suppose it's more tempting and fun to believe a lie than to seek the truth.

### **Do you think we have the space in Sri Lanka to climb the ladder based on meritocracy or does a family name and influence still matter in career progress and to bag certain assignments (or even a Ph.D.)?**

How can an individual bag a Ph.D. without actually qualifying for it? I know I graduated with an LLB honors Law degree and an LLM, Masters in Law, in the UK only after completing my exams, research and dissertation over a period of four years. Hence, I'm not sure how an individual gets awarded an internationally recognized educational qualification from a reputed institution without completing the required assessments. Even to gain entry you have to meet certain criteria. Qualifications can be freely purchased online but they are from unknown, unheard-of institutions and they hold no real value. Honorary doctorates from internationally reputed and ranked institutions are also usually only bestowed

upon acclaimed individuals who have succeeded in a particular field or industry. In response to the first part of the question of whether I think women have the space in Sri Lanka to climb the ladder based on meritocracy, I think inspirational individuals and corporate icons like Kasturi Chellaraja Wilson, Shehara Parakrama De Silva, Sandra De Zoysa, Aroshi Nanayakkara, and Rajitha Jayasuriya, to name a few, are perfect examples of climbing the corporate ladder solely based on meritocracy.

**How do you deal with controversy associated with your family? Do you enjoy the spotlight?**

What an interesting question. Hailing from a family of fifty-two immediate and extended family members, it certainly is amusing to have one or two in the family who attempt to rock the boat. My family in a nutshell includes my maternal Grandfather, Peter Hewa Warawitige, Chairman of Burnside Group and Burnside Tea Estates, Rangala, Kandy. My paternal Grandfather, Wilson George Weeraratne, was an Oxford University graduate who went on to work for the UNDP in London, Forest Department, Sri Lanka, and was the Chairman of Plywood Corporation, Sri Lanka. Father, a UK educated, Financial and Educational Consultant, Film Producer, Founder of an Education Institution and a Publisher; launched a successful publishing company in the 1990's, and published five popular tabloid newspapers. Mother; a full-time homemaker, part time philanthropist, can often be found either engaged in temple activities or traveling with her only daughter, me!

Rest of the family mix includes Entrepreneurs, Musicians, Actors, Scientists, Doctors, Lawyer's, Telecommunication Engineers, Chemical Engineers, Aeronautical Engineers, and more. From a cousin ranked in 'The Shaw Trust 2020 Disability Power 100 List UK,' which celebrates the 100 most influential disabled people in the UK; an interdisciplinary researcher she was named as an influencer in the Science category, to a twenty-six-year-old Co-Founder and Managing Director of a successful Drone manufacturing

company in Singapore, and a twenty-five year-old, Honoured Member of the Golden Key Honours Society, a PhD Scholar in Medicine, also the 2021 PhD 3M Thesis Winner awarded by the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute; all fifty-two of us engaged in varied fields of work form the Warawitige-Weeraratne family.

My sibling is an Award-Winning Music Producer who has topped the charts in Sri Lanka, South India, Maldives, Nepal and Bangladesh, albeit is undoubtedly the most controversial member of the family constantly attempting to rock the boat in Sri Lanka, nevertheless remains the only Sri Lankan Music Producer to have collaborated with Grammy Nominated Artists such as Sean Kingston, Bone Thugs N Harmony, Fatman Scoop and Chingy, to name a few.

As a family we have a policy, we will never interfere with each other's work or personal lives, but we will be there for each other as and when needed. We believe success belongs to the individual as does failure and mistakes. Each must take responsibility for their own success, failure or mistakes; learn, move on and grow! None of us are defined or identified by the other, we have all been encouraged and empowered to carve our own niche in the world.

**What has been the impact personally and professionally of winning the award for Social Media House of the Year 2020 and Youth Corporate Award of the Year 2021 at the WIM New Generation Awards?**

Both were very proud moments as it was a shared experience celebrated with my amazing young team at Wijeya Newspapers Limited. Our team started with just two members and over time grew to a forty-member strong team of young individuals primarily below the age of thirty and predominantly female. Winning the awards hugely impacted our entire department and it's a key feature we proudly and loudly announce to all prospective clients, new team members, and guests. Winning these awards has also motivated the entire team to continue thinking out of the box, be more creative, and focus on their work 24/7.



Women have to work twice as hard to be seen or heard. Even when they achieve success, they are often belittled with false accusations. An ambitious woman is portrayed as being power-hungry. A female CEO is likely to be labeled a 'tough b\*t\*h' or a 'corporate psychopath' or worse will be ridiculed with whispers of sexual favors being exchanged for that seat at the table. Hence, yes, it's important that women get highlighted for their contributions and applauded for their success. Women should dominate more headlines, be featured more, be spoken about more loudly, and be celebrated and cheered on at every given opportunity.



# HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FIRST GLOBAL AWARDS AND CONFERENCE IN DUBAI





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Dedicated to the Success of Women

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# The Breakout Star Making History

She is the first woman from Asia appointed to lead the professional body for management accountants, one of her greatest career highlights. She is excited about what lies ahead and plans to play an active role in driving the global accounting profession forward. Behind this magnificent visage is a remarkable journey of over 30 years. Naturally, the rise to such global visibility is a lesson in resilience, persistence, and tenacity. Melanie's achievement demonstrates that when you set your mind on something and stay focused, the sky's the limit. The Head of the Finance and Administration for the World Bank in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, Melanie has honed her skillset through education and training and multiple experiences, twinned with an unshakeable foundation of setting goals and staying the course. Given her personality, Melanie is up for the challenge, ready to steer the professional body to reimagine the profession, adapt and thrive.

"I believe that my election marks an important milestone in the history of CIMA, the Association, and Sri Lanka."

## Melanie Janine Kanaka

(FCMA, CGMA), CIMA President and Co-Chair of the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants, representing AICPA and CIMA has made history.

**Being a successful career woman, you may have been asked this question multiple times. We are asking it a little differently. What drove you to be a successful career woman? What drives you to be the best and the first?**

For me, three main values have helped me come this far in both my professional career and personal life. First is resilience, persistence, and tenacity. I have always been able to bounce back from challenges and setbacks in life, adapt, move forward, and grow as a person and as a professional. My resilience, persistence, and tenacity have been the key to this. It is something I discovered at a young age. In my school days, I swam the two-mile sea swim in the unknown ocean waters in Ambalangoda, a town in the deep South of Sri Lanka. Back then, it was a trailblazing event for female swimmers as there wasn't a formal swim

event for women. It was my tenacity and grit that paved the way for completing the race and most importantly for making space for and enabling the creation of the subsequent two-mile sea swim events for women in Ambalangoda.



The second value is discipline. Throughout my life, I have always set myself goals of where I wanted to be. Having the ability to effectively lead myself to focus and achieve those goals was all down to my self-discipline.

I'm also a strong believer that a healthy mind goes alongside a healthy body and so I make a point of exercising daily, which helps keep me focused.

The third is collaboration. I strongly believe that the future belongs to those who work with, not against, each other and, in the process, learn from one another. To succeed in life, we need to build meaningful connections with





others. It's all about networking, collaboration, and supporting one another to develop, rise and grow.

**Your appointment to the top post in the global body for CIMA is an achievement for Sri Lanka as well. While many Asians have and are playing prominent roles in England and globally tell us your "history-making" story that saw you, the first woman from Asia appointed to lead the professional body for management accountants.**

My career spans over 30 years and I'm quite proud of everything I've achieved so far. Let me tell you that it has taken a lot of hard work, commitment, patience, and perseverance throughout the years.

Let me start with my early years. I am a distinguished alumna of Bishop's College, Colombo, Sri Lanka, and hold a first-class B. Com Honors degree from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. I'm also a Fulbright Scholar and an accredited SAP consultant with an MBA specializing in international finance and corporate strategy from Emory University's Goizueta Business School in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

About my professional career, I have extensive experience in accounting, corporate finance, and development banking across the USA, Germany, and South Asia. I currently lead the finance and administration function for the World

Bank in Sri Lanka and Maldives where I'm responsible for finance, resource management, and performance review.

My election as 89th President of CIMA, an institute of over 100 years and which I've been a member of for over three decades, and Co-Chair of the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants, is certainly what I would mark as one of my greatest career highlights. I'm excited about what lies ahead and playing an active role in driving the global accounting profession forward.

**As the 89th President of the professional body, how do you plan to serve the fraternity differently from your predecessors ensuring that it remains relevant and robust in step with the trends and the demands of the times?**

For more than 100 years, CIMA has been the leading voice of the management accounting profession, empowering members with the critical knowledge, insight, and foresight to help organizations of all kinds succeed. And now, through our continued work with the American Institute of CPAs, as the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants, we have a stronger platform to reimagine the profession and also to adapt and thrive.

We are now building on the momentum of the past few years, that is, leaning

into change to navigate the challenging road ahead of us. But despite this, we're still picking up steam, continuing to pivot and demonstrating innovation, strength, and resilience as we re-examine our priorities.

That's why my presidential platform is "Step forward and lean in". It calls on all members of the profession to step forward as leaders to continue to demonstrate the immense value and opportunities we provide around the globe.

Specifically, there are three areas we must all focus on in the coming year. One, we need to be trusted partners. Trust, built on ethics, discipline, and integrity, is the keystone of our profession. We must constantly reinforce our duties and obligations to serve others and act in the best public interest. Two, we must help others grow. We have a collective responsibility to attract others to this valued profession and enable their growth. Three, we must foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. To unlock growth and prosperity, we have an imperative to seek out, enable and develop the best and brightest, regardless of gender, ethnicity, belief, geography, or social-economic background.

I feel fortunate to be part of this accounting profession's journey and look forward to what we can accomplish together during my presidential year.

**What sort of impact do you think your appointment to the top position at CIMA has in augmenting Sri Lanka's image abroad when everyone with knowledge of the country has a very bleak view of its present situation?**

I believe that my election marks an important milestone in the history of CIMA, the Association, and Sri Lanka. It's a true privilege to have been chosen by my peers globally to serve our members and engaged professionals around the world, including those in Sri Lanka, and I'm humbled to represent the accounting profession on the global stage.

Sri Lanka hosts the second-largest CIMA community of management accountants, behind the UK, and I

think my election shows that Sri Lanka still has a lot to offer to the world. Not just when it comes to accounting and finance but also in areas such as technical skills, trade, agriculture, and education. It's no secret that our country is going through challenging economic times, but we're an incredibly resilient nation and will indeed come out stronger.



To borrow the words of the American activist Marian Wright Edelman:

“you can't be what you can't see”, everyone needs role models to inspire success. I hope that my story will inspire others, especially young women, in Sri Lanka, Asia, and elsewhere to believe in themselves, raise their aspirations for life and reimagine their futures.

**It was nice to read that you are a product of a Sri Lankan university. As the country goes through a rough period and young people are losing hope and turning their back on pursuing higher education at our national universities which are of a very high standard, what is your advice to them?**

If I may, I will give young Sri Lankans three pieces of advice. First, find your passion, keeping it alive will help you conquer many dreams. Second, know your purpose, have strong ethics and moral principles, and third, dream big, believe in yourself, and never fear failure.

We cannot deny that things are hard for our country right now, but we've survived many crises before and it is no different for this one. My university studies were delayed due to social unrest in the country at the time so I can fully empathize with how our youth must be feeling. However, they must keep going and remember that everything that is meant for them will come in time.

**It's said that innovation and analytical thinking will be the top skills needed to thrive in the world of work by**

**2025. However, experts contend that these traits are already in demand right now and that there are machines to do a lot of tasks and that the need today is for organizations to encourage creativity that could lead to a culture of innovation that is key to developing competitive advantage. As an individual trained to look at “numbers” what do you think of this?**

Well, I think that the accounting and finance profession is the perfect

example to speak about this evolution. Historically, our profession's focus has indeed been around promoting organizational efficiencies and reducing operational costs. Yet thanks to the emergence of new technology and accelerated digital transformation, many of these tasks are now automated and we cannot, and should not, just “look at numbers” anymore. This is a tremendous opportunity to reimagine our role to become more strategic advisers and trusted partners to the business.

This means that we now need to broaden our digital skills, for example, data analytics, cybersecurity, and business models, and be recognized for questioning constructively, guiding strategic decision-making, partnering with peers, managing risks, and implementing projects, as well as providing reliable management information. To be successful, we must also enhance our communication and commercial skills to better tell the story of the business, generate new insights and business solutions, and collaborate effectively with all stakeholders to ensure long-term, sustainable business success.

In summary, we must become business influencers and leaders and position ourselves as storytellers who provide foresight to business partners to aid corporate decision-making. In my view, this shows that we now need to constantly evolve to stay relevant and ensure that we can help our organizations adapt and thrive, especially if we



**Historically, our profession's focus has indeed been around promoting organizational efficiencies and reducing operational costs. Yet thanks to the emergence of new technology and accelerated digital transformation, many of these tasks are now automated and we cannot, and should not, just “look at numbers” anymore. This is a tremendous opportunity to reimagine our role to become more strategic advisers and trusted partners to the business.**



want them to be successful in ever-changing business environments. It's a continuous, career-long process of learning, unlearning, and relearning.

**How “friendly” is the world of work/corporates in accommodating women accountants and ensuring their growth to the top?**

Generally speaking, I believe that we have come a long way when it comes to gender equality within the profession and the business world as a whole. According to the Financial Reporting Council, women make up 37% of the accounting profession worldwide, which is great to see. However, we know they remain largely underrepresented among management and partner positions, with less than a fifth of all partners being women at the largest firms. So, we know that we should, and can do more to unlock growth and release prosperity.

AICPA and CIMA bring together accounting and finance communities and minds to address some of the biggest challenges of our times. By embracing various cultures and perspectives, our profession is positioned to solve even the most complex problems. This diversity makes our profession stronger and enables us to meet the needs of the public and the organizations we serve.

Companies with more gender, racial and ethnic diversity tend to outperform those with less diverse representation. To attract and retain the best and the brightest at our organizations, we need to address biases and showcase the diversity we want to see in our profession and our organizations.

The pandemic had a unique impact on women. Studies show they not only left the workforce in greater numbers but that many did not re-enter. We cannot allow this to happen in our profession. We must enable women to have the flexibility they need to support a fair work-life balance, given their personal and professional responsibilities. There should be opportunities to exit the workforce, and re-enter when the time is more appropriate where needed.

Most importantly, we must maintain accountability through the establishment and measurement of DEI goals.

The pandemic had a unique impact on women.

It's all just talk if we don't hold ourselves accountable for change.

**How do you feel about being recognized for your career achievements at the WIM Top50 Global Awards? Are awards a “pat on the back” for a job well done or something more?**

I am extremely honored to be recognized at the WIM Top 50 Global Awards alongside so many other amazing women. In my view, awards are so much more than about acknowledging one's success. For me, they are also about recognizing one's talent, hard work, commitment, and excellence in their field. They're also a great way to share success stories with a wider audience, outside of one's family, friends, or colleagues, and inspire others to believe in themselves and make their dreams a reality.



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# A Life of Service in a Continuous Journey of Learning

With a never say never attitude, she has grown from humble beginnings and risen like a phoenix from a life-threatening illness to continue to build lives and careers. A strong advocate for women's rights, Dr. Nair considers her duty to help women reach their potential rather than being stymied by the fear of judgment of their spouses and fathers, which holds them back from fully enjoying their rights and opportunities. Her much-applauded skills development programs for women, underprivileged school leavers, and unemployed graduates in Sarawak are a dedicated effort at empowering and uplifting individuals to change their life circumstances as she did. Her positivity is evident in her words and her work as she articulates that for every problem, there will be a solution, a mantra that she promotes to help others achieve limitless success.

**Who is Dr. Lalitha Kutti Krishnan Nair described as a “multi-talented serial entrepreneur”? Tell us your story.**

Growing up in the rubber plantation village, I always tended to be helping my already very old mother with the household chores since I'm the youngest daughter and the ninth child out of ten siblings. Our poverty-stricken lives required us to be not only independent but also highly resourceful and very frugal with our money management, which, without me realizing, were talents essential to the development of entrepreneurship skills at a young age. By the time I was 15 years old, during my school holidays, I started running tuition and tutoring services, while keeping my job at the factory. I also earned a subsidiary income by crafting hairbands and helping my mother sell Cendol, an iced sweet dessert by the roadside. Hence, I believe that I developed a serial entrepreneurship skill set subconsciously over the years. Today, I aspire to use those skills to create optimum social impact through my work, so others, especially women, would not need to go through the struggles that I went through.

**How does it feel to be the only Malaysian awarded the Social Impact Award 2022 by Women In Management?**

It's truly an honor that words can't describe. I have never seen myself as a

## Dr. Lalitha Kutti Krishnan Nair

from Malaysia is an inspiring woman dubbed a multitalented serial entrepreneur.

social figure, and my social efforts were always driven without the idea or need for any form of recognition. Being given the opportunity as the only Malaysian, I could not give up the chance to represent my beloved country in receiving this award, and hopefully setting the stage and an enduring example to other aspiring women in Malaysia and out there as well.

**Tell us the type of work you have been doing in Sarawak among communities and especially among women and youth, the underprivileged school leavers, and students from various ethnic groups in vocational and skills development and its impact.**

My work focuses on driving motivation and productivity among women in my organization, both empowering and lifting women, especially from the urban poor B40 communities, whilst training more than 15,000 students and trainees in my over two decades of experience in the industry. I also aspire to spread the maximum impact to all communities throughout Sarawak through my entrepreneurship endeavors and hope to inspire other strong women to follow in my footsteps as well.

Since 1999, I have been conducting professional certificate programs together with vocational and skill training programs for underprivileged school leavers, with students ranging from various ethnic groups like the Dayaks, Malays, Melanau, Orang Ulu, etc. Our offered programs are accredited by the Ministry of Human Resources (Kementerian Sumber Manusia). Also, for unemployed graduates under the Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF), I have been conducting



Graduate Reskilling Scheme (GRS) programs and also, Industrial Skill Enhancement Programmes (INSEP).

Under HRDF Corp, I also conducted programs for B40 such as fashion design cum tailoring for single mothers and housewives. Besides that, for the young graduates, I have conducted videography programs to allow them to work as freelance videographers during the pandemic under Gig Economy and PENJANA programs. That was done under my company which is Harina Skills Training Centre, wholly owned by Amogha Maju Sdn Bhd.

**Since you also work with unemployed graduates, can you tell us how the Graduate Reskilling Scheme and Industrial Skills Enhancement Programme have helped get them into the job market?**

The Graduate Reskilling Scheme and the Industrial Skills Enhancement Programme were curated to solve the problem of the mismatch between graduate qualifications and job

opportunities in the market, especially in Malaysia. Not only are the skills not aligned with the requirements of the industry, but graduates also face issues of English proficiency and also communication skills because these are not taught in depth during their basic education. Through these programs, we create the link to narrow the gaps in

“

I could not help but come across numerous cases of women who struggle to break out of their cocoons and achieve much more due to already established and ingrained mindset of being too dependent on their husbands or fathers. As trivial as it may sound, this is extremely prevalent, especially in Malaysia. Their fear of failure to break from this oppression tends to reach astounding and daunting levels.

”

hope that the graduates become more employable, reliable, and acceptable in the workforce. Not only that, my efforts to open businesses related to the programs offered were not just to make full use of the potential workforce at hand, but also served as an incubation opportunity for these graduates to upskill their current abilities before heading out to bigger opportunities and companies within the industry.

**What do you find most challenging in your part of the world to motivate women to educate and skill themselves and pursue a career?**

Coming from a background of a typical Asian household mentality with very stereotypical roles assigned to women and men separately, I could not help but come across numerous cases of women who struggle to break out of their cocoons and achieve much more due to already established and ingrained mindset of being too dependent on their husbands or fathers. As trivial as it may sound, this is extremely prevalent, especially in Malaysia. Their fear of failure to break

from this oppression tends to reach astounding and daunting levels. This is one of the most challenging issues I face when I try to motivate the women within my community to achieve more.

**As a strong advocate for women's rights do women enjoy equal rights and opportunities and do they have the right to defend themselves before the law?**

There are strong advocacy efforts toward women's rights and opportunities within my region of the country. Women most definitely have the right to defend themselves before the law. However, I feel, as I mentioned above, that the factor that holds back women from fully enjoying their rights and opportunities is women being too worried or concerned about the thoughts and judgments of their husbands or fathers. That as I said goes back to the ingrained mindset, which I hope to impact and create awareness in changing the status quo of this.



**Having had so much to do while raising a family with children who have done well in life have you ever felt exhausted or felt that it was enough? What would be your advice to women who feel burnt out when trying to balance career/work and family?**

I am a firm believer in the Law of Attraction. We tend to attract positivity and good vibes when we keep ourselves positively motivated and setting standards of excellence in our achievements. I also see life as a never-

ending learning journey until our last breath. With the continuous learning opportunities paired with positive affirmations, I tend to not see my obstacles as burdens. So, I quite rarely feel burnt out. To the women out there, hold on to positivity and open up your minds to learning from every struggle and adversity faced. Remember, for every problem, there will be a solution, and by having this mindset, I assure you, you shall achieve limitless success and only the sky will be your limit.



# A Story

Worth Telling

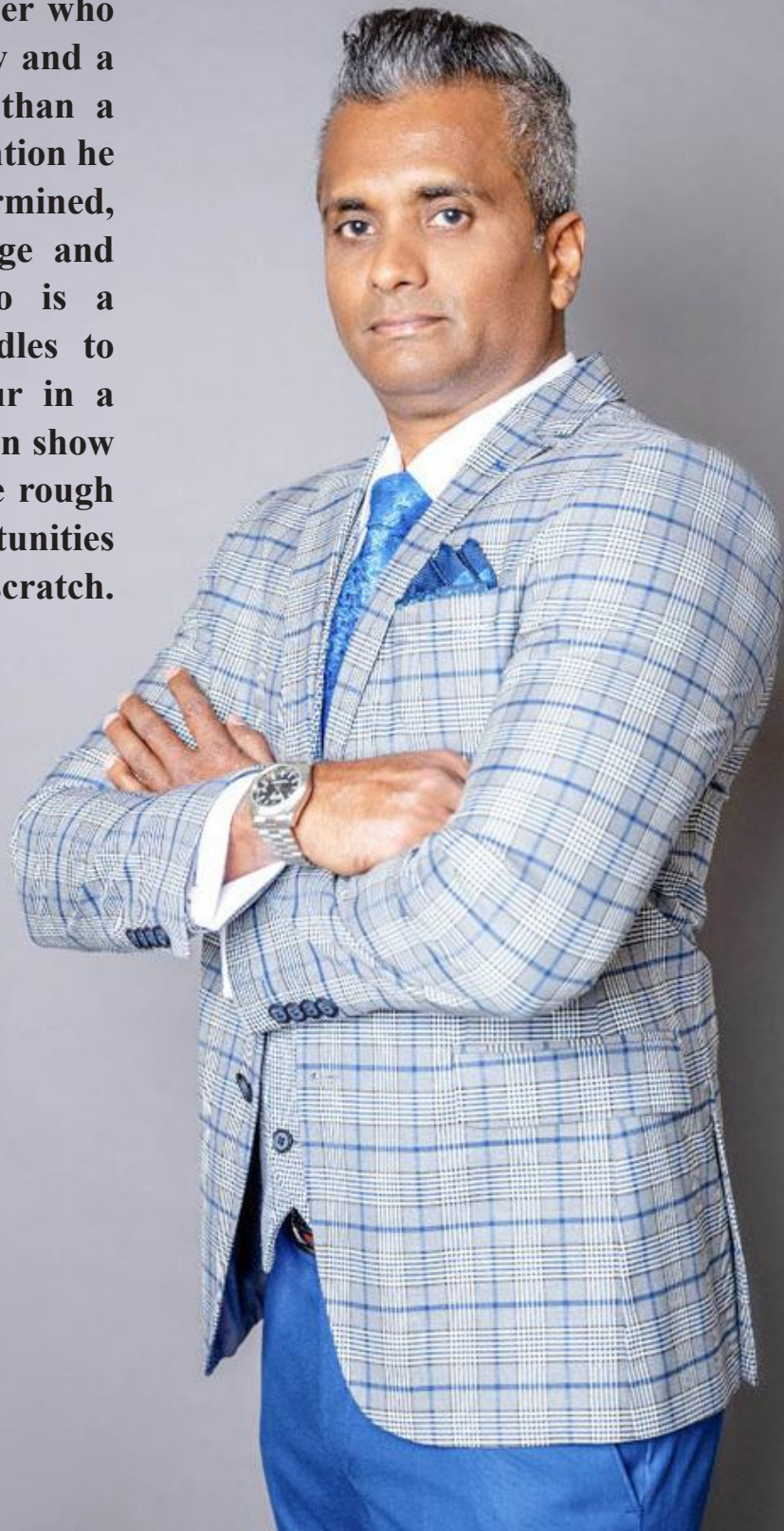
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Sam Fernando is the brain and the brawn behind Team Evention, Dubai-based marketing, and event management company. Sam who left Sri Lanka for employment in Dubai has reached exponential heights of success as a business owner in a highly competitive industry. He is a dreamer and doer who transformed an idea into a reality and a high net-worth company. More than a decade after launching Team Evention he remains driven, undaunted, determined, and ready to take on a challenge and the competition. Sam Fernando is a testament to drubbing the hurdles to become a successful entrepreneur in a foreign land and a teacher who can show how he “did it” by navigating the rough waters to harness the opportunities to build a business from scratch.

**Sam**  
**Fernando**  
is the brain and the  
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company.



**Who is Sam Fernando and what was your journey in Dubai? When did that “inspirational moment” of a business idea dawn upon you?**

Ajith Samantha Fernando is a simple, island soul, a proud Sri Lankan who came to Dubai with a dream to build a life for himself and his family. While giving my all for other organizations to grow their businesses since 1998 in the Middle East, with the lingering drive to establish my venture and be my boss to drive my dream, I made the courageous decision in 2011 to work for myself.

**What were some of the biggest challenges that you faced in your entrepreneurial journey, especially during those teething stages?**

Building credibility and gaining trust as a talented events management organization at the onset in a market that is very competitive and has global players.

**What do you consider non-negotiable as a businessperson and in your business?**

Compromising the quality of the product or service.

**Have you had any role models in your journey?**

I have always believed in creating my own, unique standards.

**Does a good challenge and competition drive you?**

Absolutely, bring it on.

**What sort of an enabling environment does Dubai provide for foreigners to invest and start businesses, especially concerning securing funding and guidance?**

It's tough for an expatriate to establish a business in Dubai in comparison to local entrepreneurs. Therefore, one has to have the grit to make it by oneself.

Given my experience, my best advice would be to try your best to establish strong networks.

**What was the Dubai that you saw when you arrived several decades ago and what it has become today? What are the lessons for Sri Lanka?**

The Dubai of today is much faster. It's in line with the global trends in comparison to the Dubai I stepped into several decades ago. Sri Lanka is blessed with an abundance of natural resources that could be harnessed for its betterment. To do that, we need a clear vision beyond selfish gains.

**As a successful businessperson of Sri Lankan origin, what do you hope for Sri Lanka's future as we navigate through one of the most challenging economic crises the country has ever had to face?**

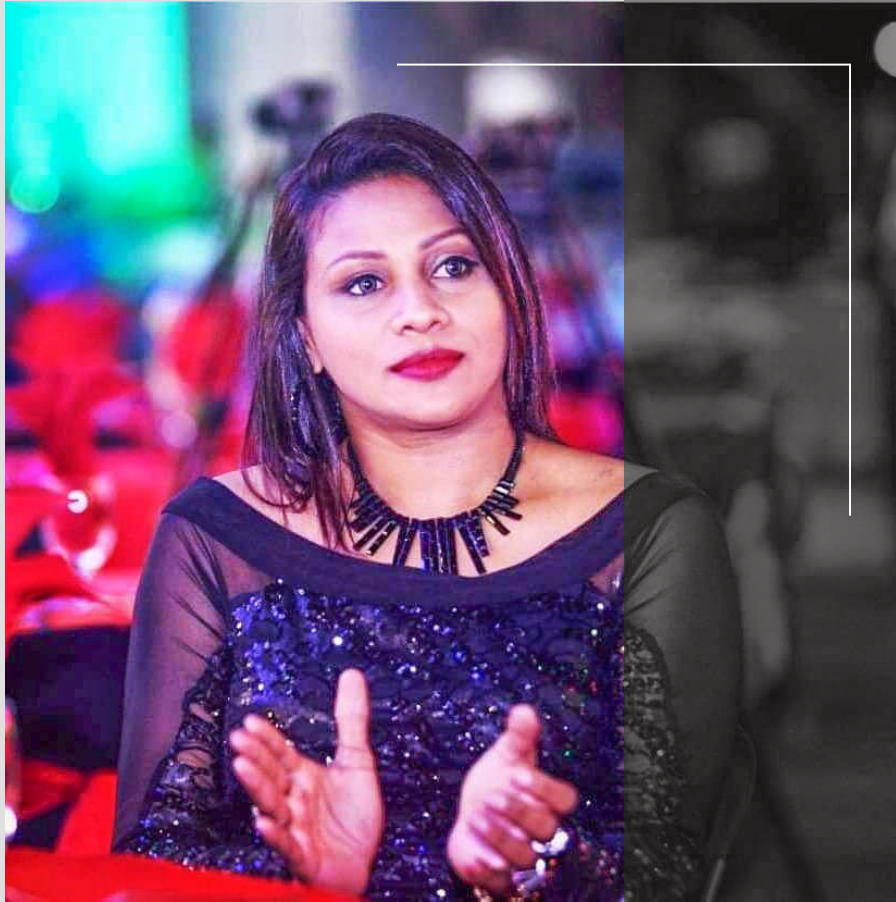
I hope for visionary leadership with long-term plans and national policies to win our nation's battles and not merely to win an election.





# The Ball's in Her Court and She's Up for The Challenge

**Aishath Nazima**



Aishath Nazima from the Maldives is a multitalented sportswoman who has represented her country in volleyball, netball, handball, basketball, and athletics. She is the first and only woman to become the Vice President of the Football Association of Maldives. Her journey in sports like everyone else has been a hard-fought one to glory. However, contrary to popular belief, Aishath points out that the Maldives has a vibrant sporting culture encouraged by the government and the parents where investing in sports includes providing state-sponsored scholarships to women and men. For Aishath who has prominently perched herself in sports administration and as a coach, competing in sports requires enormous practice, sacrifice, and resilience, but to think that it's hard for a woman to do so in so-called male-dominated sports is a myth. Luckily for Aishath, her training under male coaches was a learning curve as she was encouraged to reach the top. Fear of male dominance in sports is a creation of our own, says Aishath who believes that it's up to women to take on the baton and continue the run.



**You have been the recipient of many awards for your sports achievements. People often have a narrow worldview of women in Muslim countries. You on the other hand have excelled in multiple sports to the extent of representing your country. What made you pursue sport and what was the encouragement you received from your family, teachers, and coaches?**

Regardless of religion and gender, I would say that I'm lucky to be born into a family with a sports background and especially a nation that provides equal opportunity in any area we choose to build a career in, especially in sports. I believe challenges are opportunities when you respond to them strategically. Yes, when I started my journey in sports as a child, I had a lot of challenges as people believed that sports are for men and not for women. I had days when I cried. To overcome the odds and challenges in my long career, my family always stood by my side helping and supporting me. They were my biggest motivation in all my ups and downs. The next phase of challenges in a female athlete's life comes after marriage forcing them to retire. However, for me, my husband was a life-changing opportunity. He encouraged and motivated me during the most difficult time in my life.

I had days when I cried. To overcome the odds and challenges in my long career, my family always stood by my side helping and supporting me. They were my biggest motivation in all my ups and downs. The next phase of challenges in a female athlete's life comes after marriage forcing them to retire. However, for me, my husband was a life-changing opportunity. He encouraged and motivated me during the most difficult time in my life. His experience and knowledge in sports made my career solid rock.



His experience and knowledge in sports made my career rock solid.

**How hard was it competing in a space that we consider male-dominated sports or is it just a myth?**

Honestly, for me, it's just a myth as I never had a situation that made me feel that way. All my coaches were men who never allowed me to feel male dominance in sports. On the other hand, they showed me the path and opportunities open to women in sports. My brothers always encouraged me to reach the top that was empty because of the fear we

as women had created in our minds.

**When women rarely share space with men in a predominantly male sports body what was your journey to becoming the first female Vice President of the Football Association of Maldives? What made you pursue sports administration as a career?**

Well, I must agree that I'm lucky to have my husband as a mentor, who is a top soccer coach with a lot of knowledge and experience to guide me through my career and helped me to plan my retirement. It was in my retirement plan to remain in sports as a coach and an administrator. I thank the football community and the executive team for the opportunity and for trusting me to take on the challenge.

**Tell us about Maldivian women's participation in sports. What is the level of state sponsorship and encouragement for women to pursue sports?**

The Maldives being a South Asian Muslim country is open to providing equal opportunities. In addition, we have a new generation of young parents who understand the importance of sports and an active lifestyle for the growth of children. The opportunities for government-sponsored

scholarships have significantly increased the participation of women in sports.

**How could other countries in the region develop hitherto sports confined to men among women more robustly? Do you think that our countries are doing enough/not doing enough and investing enough to encourage women's participation in male-dominated sports?**

Not to be biased, but i believe that most countries especially, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh are doing a great job in creating opportunities and developing women's participation in sports and now it's up to us, that is, it's in women's hands to sustain the run.

**How did the Maldives achieve such a standard in women's participation in sports?**

From the very beginning, Maldivian women were actively involved in both cultural and competitive sports. It was sort of a trend every evening from four to six for people to play sports, which was a mode of social gathering on every Island. Also, the Island-level competitions on festivals like Muslim Eid, National Day, Independence Day, etcetera have highly participated events that I believe is one reason for the participation and involvement of women in sports and as generations change, reasons also keep changing with more competitive demands.

**What are your thoughts on being recognized by Women In Management for your achievements?**

I'm lost for words to express my feelings about WIM creating an international platform to bring the career achievements of women to the fore. Providing a prominent global platform for women's career achievements to be recognized gives women visibility and encourages and motivates all women across the globe to push boundaries.

This recognition of my achievements will become the biggest support for my work in promoting women's participation in sports.



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