Our Conversation with Suhani Jalota

Suhani Jalota is a Duke student studying Global Health and Economics. Suhani, along with three women in Mumbai from the slum communities, founded Myna Mahila Foundation (MMF). Currently, MMF is in one redeveloped colony in Mumbai and aims to expand to 500 slums all over the country, then around the world. MMF is named for the Myna, a bird that is characteristic of being talkative, which matches MFF’s mission to encourage women talk about the issues they are most afraid to discuss aloud, such as menstruation, toilets, and sanitation.

While classified as a nonprofit private company in India, Myna Mahila is a network of female entrepreneurs who produce and sell low cost, high quality products for women. Their current goal is to tackle menstrual hygiene by making high quality sanitary pads and maternity pads and selling them at affordable rates in the same slum communities. This network provides formal employment for young women, helps fight stigma surrounding menstruation, and increases usage of sanitary pads.

Duke I&E: How did you first get involved with startups?

SJ: Freshmen year, I took Technology for Health as a part of the Global Health Focus program because it sounded like something I had not done before. Little did I know the purpose of the class was to apply to the Duke Startup Challenge. Our team actually made it pretty far, but we decided not to continue with the project because we didn’t work well together as a team and the idea didn’t come from within us. You need to have an excellent team, the idea has to come from within, and everyone has to believe in it for it to really work. Before then, I always had ideas, but always looked at development and creating change from a social perspective, not through a business lens.

Duke I&E: Despite this difficult first experience with startups, you continued to participate in various startup challenges, such as the Innovation Co-Lab STEAM Challenge. From these startup challenges you had so many ideas, but how did you transition into executing one idea and creating Myna Mahila Foundation?

SJ: Originally, the idea for making sanitary pads and selling them came from the women in the slum in Mumbai with whom I had worked with for the last four years, during the Hult Prize Challenge. But, it was the Melissa & Doug Entrepreneurs program, which really helped me focus and execute this idea. After entering the program, I told Howie about my many startup ideas ranging from women water mechanics to an emergency care application. From my mentors through the program and elsewhere, I learned that it’s great to have many ideas, but you can only implement one at a time. And, even then, there’s a high chance you will fail. Though I had no business experience then, I knew that even if MMF does not work out in the way we imagined, I had the strongest team in the
communities to start a company and we could make a difference. I was convinced we could be big and improve women’s health. We are all passionate about creating employment for women and improving their health. Our vision is to empower as many women as possible by giving voice to women around the world to say the things they are most afraid to say aloud and live their dreams.

**Duke I&E:** This vision for female empowerment extends well beyond fighting the stigma around sanitary pads. Tell me about how you’re looking to change the role of women in business and encourage future female entrepreneurs.

**SJ:** Nobody thinks big picture when you’re stuck in this web of poverty. We want to get young women involved to think this big picture. We want to build women leaders in management as well. One of the supervisors is 23 years old, who grew up in the same slum, and she is managing the entire company’s operations. She will soon be our chief operating officer. Sheryl Sandberg has been an advocate for women rising in management to be in the C-level positions, but if women are not provided a basic platform where they can think beyond the daily meals they are cooking, it is unlikely that we will ever be able to tap into the potential of women around the world. I am trying to create a mentoring network so these women get an opportunity to understand what CEOs do and come out of their shell. My personal goal is to connect these women to female business leaders in India and give them the wings to fly.

**Duke I&E:** Do you have any advice for other undergraduate students who are interested in starting their own social ventures?

**SJ:** Coming up with an idea for a company is very different from actually doing it. And, if you’re willing to carry it out, it’s a huge commitment. Something I wish I had, that I think people should have, is patience. But, also never let go of that burning desire to get things done at the rate you want to get things done. Don’t let anything stop you! There’s a quote that I go by, “crazy people create history, while wise people read history”, and you get to decide what you want.