



# Here's to woman power!

A delegation of influential British-Asian women tell Nicole Dastur how determination and a go-getter spirit helped them overcome gender and racism stereotypes

**M**en are from Mars and women from Venus. Men are meant to be the bread-winners, the woman's place is in the kitchen. A woman cannot be a successful leader — definitely not a boss — she's too emotional and can't handle the stress. Wrong, wrong and wrong. Well, men may be from an altogether different emotional and psychological planet from women and may handle situations differently, but there's news: women can do it just as well, even better at times! The world over, women are taking over the so-called 'male territory', be it in the household or at the workplace. The female sex is comfortably sitting in the boss's chair, and is doing a phenomenally fantastic job! No, it may not always be smooth sailing, but the fruits of success sure are sweet. And who should know better than this delegation of women — comprising mostly British Asians who hold high posts in the UK right from CEOs and entrepreneurs in different fields — who were recently in Mumbai for a private visit. Brought down in association with Rashmi Jolly, former President of the IMC Ladies' Wing, each of these women have a story to tell, a

tale of their fight for survival in a man's world. And all of them emerged winners.

The delegation came down under the leadership of Pinky Lilani, patron of numerous international causes and co-founder and chairman of the Asian Women of Achievement Awards (AWA). The cause of women is something that is very dear to Pinky. "The main problem women suffer the world over is that of low self-esteem and no belief in themselves. It's tougher for Asian women in the UK, because they have to overcome racist stereotypes as well," believes Pinky, whose brainchild AWA has given many women not just a platform to prove themselves, but also role models to follow. A few cases in point: Barrister Ruby Sayed dedicates much of her free time to the Asian Women's Resource Centre, and does what she can to empower women and children of ethnic minorities, women who've been through domestic violence and deprived children. "Women are often forced to hold back from achieving their full potential, but my message to all women is that if you really want to do something, then just do it!"

Entrepreneur Noreen Mirza, who set up her own designing

business at a young age, agrees that "if you have a dream, live it!" Not that it was a smooth ride for her, but the challenges only made her stronger. "If you don't try, you'll never know. But it's important to learn from your mistakes," advises this young entrepreneur:

Shernaz Engineer, CEO of a recruitment agency, believes that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. "I was in a financial crisis, people said I had failed, the anger made me work harder, I wanted to show them. It was sheer determination and persistence to succeed that made me go on, even when the odds were against me," says Shernaz.

Kamel Hothi, Asian Markets Director of a bank, has also encountered many challenges in her "male-dominated profession", including the 'glass ceilings' and stereotyping of women. But it was her commitment, hard work and gentle approach that helped her cross these barriers. Superna Sethi, MD of a properties firm, remembers how she took gambles, which is sometimes necessary to succeed, provided it's a calculated risk.

But it's not all bleak as Nishma Gosrani, Vice President for Leadership and Talent Management of a business, is all

for women as leaders. "Women are very good at multitasking, and because we are people's people, we are great with dealing with different situations. Women make fantastic leaders!" Yet, there is also always the issue of family versus career, which every working woman faces at some point in her life. Kavita Oberoi, MD of a consulting agency, was brought up in a strict Asian ethos in the UK. But she learnt how to effectively manage home, family and work. "Just believe in your idea and keep your focus, you'll eventually get there," she smiles confidently.

Racism is another issue some of these women have had to deal with. Nabila Sadiq, had it doubly difficult, being a Muslim. But it was her resilience to do something, to prove a point, that helped her fight the stigmas. Fola Komolafe too had a tougher deal, being a woman and an African American. "But I made a conscious decision that my credibility be based on my achievements, not on my gender or race. I made it a non-issue rather than an over-riding issue." Guess when there is a will, there will always be a way!