

Praise for the Book

‘Increased participation of women in the Indian workforce is an economic and social imperative. This book encourages young women to think big by showing them success stories of relatable role models from diverse professions and backgrounds. Varsha’s book is a must-read for all Indian girls and women. I highly recommend it!’

Akshay Kothari, Head of International, LinkedIn

‘There has never been a more exciting time for this book – women are forging a new path forward, and these personal stories from India’s pioneering young women will spark the motivation needed for the next generation of change. These stories powerfully highlight the modern Indian woman’s important role as a change-maker, boundary-breaker and shaper of her own destiny.’

Rachana Bhide, Bloomberg

‘*Wonder Girls* is an inspiring set of stories about possibilities that one can relate to – real-life stories about young women achieving success the way they define it. I would gift this book to my daughter. Thanks to Varsha for coming up with this wonderful book, and thanks to each of the women featured for sharing her incredible journey . . . truly inspirational!’

Muthiah Venkateswaran, Consultant, Spencer Stuart

‘The stories of role models showcased in this book offer confidence and direction to young women to pursue their dreams. The book highlights in exquisite detail the strength and fortitude with which women overcome the challenges that come their way. A truly inspirational read!’

Priya Naik, Founder & CEO, Samhita Social Ventures

‘I wish *Wonder Girls* existed when I was growing up! It would have made me realize sooner that I had it in me to follow my dreams.’

Kaneez Surka, Improv artist and stand-up comic

‘The attributes of a successful leader in our world today – compassion, creativity and intelligence – are not gendered. These stories in *Wonder Girls* will empower young women to tap into their immense potential, unconstrained by the expectations of others. If you can see it, or read about it, you can be it!’

Lavanya Ashok, Goldman Sachs

Wonder Girls

Wonder Girls

Success Stories of Millennials
Who Fought to Do It Their Way

Varsha Adusumilli

 juggernaut

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*To my grandfather
Dr Mandava Venkata Krishna Rao*

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Foreword

A river always flows to its full potential despite the diversions and resistances along the way

A role model challenges your limitations, opens up new horizons and inspires you to become something more than what you may have expected of yourself. In understanding the lives and choices of your role models, valuable insights unfold, offering lessons that help you make your own choices.

As I look back on my life, I see three strong women as my role models. My mother, who was a pillar of conviction, believed that education for my sister and me was the highest priority for the family. My Telugu teacher, who cultivated in me an appreciation for poetry, taught me critical analysis techniques that could be applied to any topic. She also encouraged me to participate in debates and stand up for myself confidently. These skills have truly served me throughout my life and career. My third role model was my maths teacher, who refused to

accept my failures and, in nurturing my intellect, showed me that with hard work and the right attitude, I could make it to the top. Truly unlocking someone's hidden potential is probably the best thing role models do.

A little later in life, my role models turned out to be people whom I didn't know intimately, but whose lives reflected a kind of success that could not have been predicted, given their earlier life circumstances. By reading about such people and by meeting some of them, I derived the courage to dream big and try things that were beyond my immediate reach or beyond the circumstances of my birth. At every phase of life, I looked for role models from whom I could get the answers I wanted for the path I had chosen. A role model's journey serves as an inspiration to forge ahead on one's own chosen path as it gets harder.

One of the questions I was often asked in the mid-1980s, when I moved to the US, was: 'Are Indian women more like you, or are you unlike most Indian women?' Perhaps this question was prompted by my enthusiasm and curiosity to try out things unfamiliar to me, like hiking down the Grand Canyon, learning to swim long distance, cross-country skiing, etc. Truly speaking, I never felt that I was unique. I always felt that Indian women are extremely strong and that they showcase their strength in different ways. Even though my mother had a limited education, she was strong for her children; it is her strength that I have inherited. Today my strength is perhaps better recognized than my mother's – or many an Indian woman's – ever was. But I know that my mother

had the strength to accomplish the things that mattered to her and that she faced many challenges with faith and courage.

The heritage of Indian women is their quiet strength, which they pass on to the next generation of daughters. The need of the hour is that we give our daughters the scope to pursue the path that calls to them. I hope we don't pull them back into a prison where their dreams and aspirations are curtailed in the name of safety or tradition.

When Varsha asked me to write the foreword for this book, I immediately said yes, as the cause of showcasing role models whose lives other young women can relate to resonated deeply with me. Common to all the young women featured in this book is a set of core traits I admire. These traits were also what got me to notice Varsha in 2011, when she was working at a digital media start-up, YourStory. I could immediately see a young woman who cared about excellence, who was deeply committed to her work, was extremely smart, confident and fearless, and was marching to her own drumbeat. I saw someone who would create an impact on others through her life, and I kept tabs on her, staying in touch with her. Over time, my relationship with Varsha evolved as we worked on many projects together. Each time we worked on a project, she brought in the same level of consistency, focus, energy and commitment to excellence, and a deep thirst to learn. When she was switching careers, I asked her to work on a new initiative I wanted to start at Kalaari Capital, called Kstart. Varsha worked with me for two years, and in her

highly effective way played an instrumental role in setting up Kstart, our seed initiative. As the time came for her to pursue other passions, I was glad to support her, and now I am excited to be part of this book. Varsha plays an important role in bringing out the voice of a particular generation – and that voice is really one of the modern Indian woman who is strong, confident and wants to live life without compromising her dreams.

Though the intent of this book is to reach out to young women and unlock their potential and aspirations, I would also recommend this book to partners, parents and friends of those young women, which is basically all of us. This book explains the pulse of India through what Indian women of today represent.

As a river flows, it encounters many diversions and much resistance, yet one thing about the river is immutable: drawn by its natural force, it always finds a way into the ocean to renew the cycle of life. In India, the river is always considered feminine. It represents strength and power, and is famed both for its giving attitude and for achieving its objective. By reading this book, I hope every reader, just like the river, finds the courage to fuel her own passions and flow onwards to fulfil her potential, giving back to the world and enriching the lives she touches along the way.

I hope you enjoy as much as I did the stories of the courageous young women in this book.

Vani Kola, MD, Kalaari Capital

Introduction

In 2016, I attended my best friend's wedding in Jaipur. Little did I know that it would be a life-altering occasion for me. The wedding was spread out over a few days, and during my time there I met many young local girls who were brimming with enthusiasm and questions. Once I befriended the girls and they were comfortable in my presence they began to open up to me about the issues that deeply mattered to them. But first I had to answer the many questions they were looking for answers to.

'Didi, how old are you?' 'Why are you still unmarried?' 'Aren't your parents worried that you're not married?' 'You've travelled abroad?! How?' 'Your parents allow you to live alone?' 'Didi, I want to get a job in the city. How can I do this?' 'Didi, I really want to become a doctor. How can I convince my parents?'

I was intrigued to see that their questions followed a similar and predictable track, and this set me thinking. As I told them my life story, I noticed a spark in their eyes

as they discovered that there were many life and career choices that existed in the world. The girls were genuinely happy to find someone they could relate to, someone who was also slightly unconventional. In that moment of their discovery and comfort, I had inadvertently sparked a desire in their young minds – that they too could pursue their own unique paths. Exposing these young girls to new choices felt like breathing new life into their beings.

It was clear to me that these young girls were seeking role models they could look up to and consult while making important life decisions. Magazines, journals and newspapers obsessively focus on women achievers, which is necessary and important too, but the women featured by them are too far ahead in their journeys, and many regular Indian girls cannot relate to them. Regular Indian girls crave stories of initiative from their next-door neighbours, someone who speaks their language, someone who dresses like them and someone they could, perhaps, have access to.

Once I was back from the wedding, I began researching women and their careers, and the data I acquired was surprising. Only 27 per cent of working-age women have jobs in India.¹ In China, this figure is 61 per cent, while in the United States it is 56 per cent.² Even though the employment rates for women are growing the world over, in India those numbers are sliding.³ Yes, women are getting educated in huge numbers, but that is not necessarily translating into workforce participation.⁴ This is a problem that needs solving.

Several ongoing and past researches indicate that when women work outside their homes there is better decision-making at home, which leads to healthier families overall. Encouraging participation of women in the workforce is not only a social but also an economic imperative. According to a Mckinsey report published in 2015, India would add a whopping \$700 billion to its GDP in 2025 if women's workforce participation advanced towards equality with that of men.⁵

As the adage goes, 'If she can see it, she can become it.' I want to show young Indian women that there are many different career options for them in the world. They can be anything and do anything they set their hearts and minds on. The stories in this book peek into the lives of young women who have pursued and excelled in many diverse careers, and whom the regular Indian girl can relate to. The women featured in this book range from scientists to artists, from neurosurgeons to sportspersons. And they've all had to cross many hurdles to achieve their goals. This book is an attempt to bridge the role model gap for Indian girls. Choosing your own career is not easy as there is usually immense parental and societal pressure to do as others want you to. But, as you will find out after reading this book, choosing your own path is the most satisfying and sometimes the only option that makes sense.

When my publisher and I were working on shaping the chapters, we were shocked by the minuscule percentage of female workforce participation in many Indian industries.

If 27 per cent is the best that we can achieve, then we have miles to go before we sleep. According to an article written by Rohini Pande and Charity Troyer Moore in *The New York Times*, all is not doom and gloom.⁶ The good news is that when conditions are favourable, Indian women have made significant strides in the workplace. Women head large banks in India. Twelve per cent of the pilots employed by Indian airlines are women.⁷ This is a favourable statistic, against the worldwide average of 5 per cent.

Women can be each other's guides and inspiration. If you are a woman in the professional workforce, find a young girl in your community and tell her about your work and why you do what you do. Seek out other girls and share your passion with them. If you are a young woman interested in finding a role model you can relate to, ask the people in your network, research online, reach out to the role models you find and nudge them to tell you their secrets. Create a giant network of women, each supporting the next, and let the chain be infinite. Every little step is one big stride in empowering women.

This book is a step towards getting more women into India's workforce – and not just in traditional careers. I sincerely hope this book inspires young women to choose their own career paths and model their lives as they would like them to be. My hope is that when we show young women relatable role models they will gain the courage to take a leap of faith. I want young women to read this book and think – if they can do it, so can I!

1

Rugby Captain: Neha Pardeshi

Only one per cent of Indian girls have played any kind of organized sport in their lives⁸

I am of small build. But that has never stopped me from doing what I do.

When I tell people that I'm a rugby player, they look at me in disbelief and shock. 'It can't be,' they say. 'You are so tiny!' 'How do you play this beast of a sport?' 'Is this a joke?' I laugh their comments away, because you really have to see me in action to know how strong I actually am.

But why rugby? Have you lost your mind? – you may ask. Why not cricket, or tennis, or badminton?

Here's why: I found rugby when I was fifteen and I fell in love with it.

I am a young middle-class woman from Pune. I was the first girl from my family who went to an English-medium school; all my cousins studied in Marathi-medium schools. My parents had to fight my paternal grandparents to enrol me in an English-medium school. My grandparents believed that kids who go to English-medium schools are not well mannered. They feared I would turn out to be a brat. My earliest memory of my schooldays is of shifting back and forth between English- and Marathi-medium schools. My mother was relentless

about her insistence on an English-medium school for me, and eventually she won my grandparents over. The school I was finally admitted to gave equal importance to academics, arts and sports.

My mother and father ran a small gym in our locality. My father used to take me to gymnastics class every evening when I was in class one. He noticed that I was doing well in that sport, so he pushed me to train at any opportunity I got. My father loved sports. In fact, he was into bodybuilding when he was younger.

The Pune racecourse was located very close to my school. My father would take me to the racecourse every morning before he dropped me off at school. I loved running on the race track. I still remember how happy that morning ritual of ours made me feel. By the time I got to class three I was the fastest runner at school, winning all the competitions. I would challenge anyone who was willing to race with me, and I don't remember ever losing.

One day, the handball coach at school noticed me running during one of the physical education classes and asked me to give the sport a try. I did. I was ten years old at the time.

I began training with my handball coach every day. I would also do the practice drills all by myself, before and after school hours. My father would take me to school an hour early and pick me up an hour after school. Making a mark in sports is excruciatingly hard, but my parents' emotional support was critical in my journey.

I participated in handball selections several times at the state level but, unfortunately, I lost out to less competent players every time. I never understood why I was losing. Back home, I would cry, as I was devastated every time I was not picked. I knew I was the best player that showed up for the selections, but why was I not making the cut? Was there something wrong with me? Was I not doing enough work? I would convince myself that if I worked harder I would make it the next year. I would ask the coaches to help me out in my weaker areas. I would train like crazy. I once did 200 dodges in one session. My coach thought I was going nuts. My tryst with handball continued for four years. Every year I would work insanely hard, but the outcome never changed. I never made it past the state-level selections in handball.

I was thirteen when I figured out that the person who got selected every time was the daughter of the tournament sponsor. That was my first brush with the dirty politics of the sporting world. I had to learn to come to terms with it.

My dejection with handball was so apparent that it came to the notice of the school athletics coach, who asked me to try out the track. Having given up all hope in handball, I threw myself into athletics with determination. It was athletics that led me to participate at the national level, in the category of hurdles. I trained hard for it, waking early every morning to run across the city. I am familiar with every nook and corner of Pune because I would run a different route every morning.

Athletes are addicted to competition, winning and getting ahead. In the beginning, I was desperate to play at the state level. My prayer in those days was simple, ‘God, please give me an opportunity to play for my state.’ Eventually, when I got to play at the national level, I was hungry to represent the country in international tournaments. When I showed up for the national-level hurdle races, they were also selecting teams for the Commonwealth Games. I thought I was going to make the cut, but I tripped during the selections. The girl who was behind me was selected instead. I felt humiliated. I cried for days, like a sore loser. My mother would often say, ‘You are my daughter. You are not a loser. You will find a way. Keep going.’

My failure only egged me on further, and a new dream took hold – I wanted to play for my country. Gradually, this dream became an obsession.

Of course, alongside all of this I had to study too. I was not a stellar student, but that didn’t mean I ignored my studies. I did reasonably well at school and college. I didn’t fail any exams. After college, I got a job as a digital and outdoor marketer at a Pune firm. Even though sports was my first love, I had to make a living.

During my stint in athletics, I accidentally got introduced to rugby via a local club in Pune. Coach Surhud Khare from the Khare Football and Rugby Academy, Pune, visited our school and invited us to attend the women’s rugby match that he was organizing over the weekend. One of my friends and I went to watch the

match, just for fun. We enjoyed the game so much that we wanted to give it a try. Surhud encouraged us to attend a practice session. He had grown up in Africa and had played rugby all through his childhood. When he came back to India he made a commitment to introduce and grow rugby in India. Surhud is the reason why people play rugby in Pune today. He introduced the local football players to rugby, and they passionately took to the new sport. Surhud later confessed to me that he didn't think I had it in me to be a rugby player. 'You are so small. I never thought you could play this sport. I changed my mind after I saw you run. Any doubts I had were wiped out after I saw you tackle your opponents.'

That one practice session changed my life forever. I had played nearly every sport there was, but had never enjoyed any of them as much as I did rugby. There was no looking back after that evening.

I was fifteen at the time. Since then I have been showing up for my rugby practice session from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. every single day. I played rugby in the scorching heat and during the harsh monsoon. I made no excuses. The only days I skip are when I am out of Pune for a tournament.

'Why do you love rugby so much?' a friend once asked me. 'You have played other sports before, but why this?'

Most people think rugby is a sport for hooligans. The truth is far from it. Every rugby player I know is extremely kind and respectful. What draws me to rugby are the core values the sport inculcates in its players. I can tell you that

my life after rugby has been very different from my life before it. The sport of rugby revolves around solidarity, respect, integrity, discipline and fairness. Coach Surhud taught me how to inculcate these core values in my game. I have seen men who are seven feet tall and weighing over 100 kg play the sport like beasts, but off the field they are true gentlemen.

A few years ago, I was going through a rough phase because of a financial situation at home. I told nobody about it, but my teammates could sense that something was not quite right with me. Throughout that phase my teammates constantly checked in on me. They would visit me often and WhatsApp me stupid jokes to make me laugh. They sensed my unsaid problems in a way that only sportspersons can.

Sports also taught me confidence. Rugby involves tackling opponents. It's a different kind of confidence-builder to knock down a giant opponent with just shrewdness or deftness of technique. I have done thousands of tackles so far. Since I am small of build no one expects me to tackle and bring down bigger opponents, but I always do. Sometimes you get tackled and fall too. The rule of rugby is to get back on your feet and dive back into the thick of it. Because of rugby, I know that no matter what challenges life may throw at me, I can tackle them . . . and even if I fall, what's the worst thing that could happen? I will get back up and keep going. This spirit is deeply ingrained in me now.

My commitment to and consistency with rugby paid

off. In early 2016, I was made captain of the Indian rugby team. I cried when I heard the news. I didn't know what to do. I called up my father, crying, and he thought I was in trouble. He began to freak out. '*Beta, kya hua? Kya hua?*' he kept asking. When I was finally able to stop crying I told him I had been made captain of the Indian rugby team and didn't know what to do. My father burst out laughing. He told me I fully deserved the title.

A few months before the Asian 7s tournament in 2016, I suffered a debilitating injury. My situation was grim: people who had seen how badly injured I was just a few months prior to the big tournament didn't think I had any chance of representing India at the Asian 7s, let alone captaining the team.

It was October 2016. The rugby nationals in Odisha were coming up in three months. I had grown overconfident and wanted to push myself with my training. One evening, I was working out at my mother's gym and I ended up doing twenty repetitions of 90 kg deadlifts. That's a hell of a lot of weight to lift!

When I got back home that night from the gym my back was extremely sore from the intensive exercise, but I brushed it aside. Injury in sports is a natural price a sportsperson has to pay. No pain, no gain. I was accustomed to soreness. I thought my back would heal soon so I wasn't worried. I had my high-protein dinner, reviewed my daily task list, wrote the day's journal entry and played with my cats before going to bed.

The next day I woke up at 5 a.m., went for a run and,

later, for my 6 a.m. rugby practice session. It was business as usual. During practice I strained my back after passing the ball. The pain was excruciating. I could not stand up straight, bend down or even touch my toes. I was operating like a robot. I would wake up in the middle of the night and cry uncontrollably.

When I finally went to see a doctor, he took one look at my anxious face and said, 'Don't even think about the upcoming tournament. There is absolutely no way you will be able to play, let alone compete fiercely at a rugby tournament.' My back was injured and the muscles were severely knotted up.

The doctor tried needle therapy on my back and glutes for the next couple of days. He was working through the knots day after day, but there was no relief. I figured his treatment was not going to help me. I had a tournament coming up and I needed to get better. So I decided to try something else.

I reached out to an acquaintance who was a physiotherapist. After she examined me she said, 'Don't get your hopes up too much. There is a small chance that you might get better before the tournament. If you want that to happen, you will have to visit me every day for the therapy sessions, and you will have to strictly follow my instructions.'

Her facility was a forty-five-minute drive from my home, which didn't deter me at all, as not playing the nationals was not an option for me. I was determined to fix my back.

The months leading up to the tournament were some of the hardest I've had to endure. I continued to wake up at 5 a.m., followed my training regimen, showed up at my day job, and after work drove my scooter to the physiotherapist's by late evening. It would be 11 p.m. by the time I got home. The therapy was a far-from-pleasant experience. In fact, saying that the process was painful would be an understatement. At one point I had twenty-seven needles in my back for fifteen minutes! It was horrible. If I ever have to picture what hell looks like, I just have to think about that one therapy session. But I needed to recover. I had no choice. And, on top of the physical pain came the financial burden too. I was paying through my nose for the sessions.

And that's another thing I've lived with all my life.

To this day rugby hasn't paid me, but I have never been bitter about it. I was always fully aware that in India, unless you played cricket or badminton, you can't really make a living by being a sportsperson. It was with this in mind that all through my college years, while I was pursuing the sport seriously, I made sure my studies never suffered. Later, I knew I had to keep my day job if I wanted to continue my passion for rugby. Otherwise my dream wouldn't be possible, and I would be on the road.

My mother confronted me during my injury phase, concerned with the rising doctor's bills. 'What are you doing? Rugby is not going to pay you anything. What do you think you will become eventually? Where do you think you are headed in life?'

I couldn't tell her that there would come a time when my passion would sustain me financially, because that's the honest truth. But I did convince her that rugby is where my heart lies. Even if there is no money in it, it's fine, I told her. I will have to keep playing to maintain my sanity, even if that meant I had to work two jobs every day. My mother has largely been supportive and understanding, but there are phases when she worries about what will happen to me. As a parent, her anxiety is justifiable.

Two weeks into the physiotherapy, I could finally bend down to pick up a pencil from the ground. I was making progress, but slowly. Within a month, my range of motion improved slightly. My mother saw how disciplined I was all through this phase. She finally realized that I was not going to give up on my dream, come what may. She came to terms with my passion for rugby and began to encourage me. 'Keep going, Neha! Don't overthink this. Follow the exercises and the routine. You will be fine.' Her reassurance and presence were crucial in my recovery. Sometimes, psychological assurance is all one needs not to break.

My injury happened in October 2016, leaving me with November and December for recovery before the nationals began. Following the nationals, we were scheduled to play at the Asian 7s in Laos in February. The nationals were being held in Odisha. Two weeks prior to the nationals, I was able to run. I felt ready to play again.

My efforts had paid off. Nobody had thought I would recover, but with the right help and guidance I recovered