

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

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LEADERS IN ACTION

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INNOVATION AND SOCIAL DESIGN FOR A GLOBAL IMPACT

Jessica Van Thiel and Shivani Singh are co-founders of consultancy PATHFINDER that works with business, academia and policymakers to find innovative solutions in sustainable development. Their business began in 2016. In 2018, it became certified as a B Corporation, and in July 2020 they signed the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs). It has clients and partners in Africa North, Europe and America.

Jessica says: "PATHFINDER's mission is to create solutions to enable the world's most vulnerable people through a unique systemic approach by simultaneously influencing social entrepreneurship, academics and policy."

Jessica and Shivani met and became friends while Jessica was working in Mauritius.

Shivani said: "We both wanted passionately to change the system to engage more sustainably. We found it frustrating that the world kept perpetuating methods and organizations that didn't work, and throwing money at problems repeatedly, while hoping for them to disappear. We discussed applying the principles of business instead. We wanted to empower people to take care of their own families and communities while living with dignity and autonomy. Doing so was not only a sustainable way forward, but also, one that scaled impressively. We wanted to challenge the status quo and work to find much better outcomes."

PATHFINDER's way of working creates a feedback loop back into academia and civil society through its partnerships, research and publications. "We provide business support and training for our partners; we help document the entire experience for study in academia – and we use what we learn to help build sensible policy as well. Our model is built to sustain and scale, and it can be reproduced." Shivani said. They have now trademarked their company's comprehensive model of engagement in Canada.

The co-founders come from different backgrounds, have different skills and are based on different continents – Shivani in Canada and Jessica in France. But Shivani explains: "People often remark at how strong we are as a team, and how far we've come in such little time."

Jessica added: "We've both had such different upbringings and experiences. One thing we have in common though is that we are persevering and hard-working. We don't believe there is a place for gender inequality in the year 2020. It should not be tolerated in any workplace, anywhere. That is an issue that drives us. There's an injustice here that we need to be working towards eliminating."

Travelling towards a global social enterprise

Jessica was born and raised in Canada, with a Greek father and a Quebecoise mother. Growing up in a bilingual household with a global perspective, Jessica was inspired to explore the world by becoming a flight attendant at the age of 18, while also studying for a degree in political science and international relations.

She has gone on to obtain a PhD in science and technology policy studies from the Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex; a PhD in Management and Business, University of Surrey; and a Master's Degree in Human Security and Peacebuilding and Conflict Analysis Management and Environmental Management, Royal Roads University, Canada.

Jessica's career developed into NGO work in humanitarian and international development in South Africa and Mauritius, before working on public policy in Brussels. She recalls that, early on, it was male professors who exposed her to international development and humanitarian issues. Later, in her professional career, she was predominantly surrounded by strong female role models.

She also expressed gratitude for her parents' support. "I felt like every opportunity was available to me. I feel very privileged as a woman to have grown up in Canada, because I've seen what gender equality looks like in some parts of the world. I've felt that I had a social responsibility to work in this field. My parents were advocates of everything I did and that was really encouraging."

Shivani grew up in India, in several countries in the Middle East, and in the United States. She recalls a childhood that was difficult. Often at odds with cultural and traditional expectations of her, Shivani found herself speaking up for the women in her life from an early age. "I grew up watching all these women around me being treated as less than men, while bearing equal or often bigger burdens of responsibility."

Even as a child, Shivani remembers never feeling like she fitted in because she spoke her mind. "I wouldn't just be quiet because I was told to." As things at home got more challenging, she was determined to find a way out for herself and her family. With this same persistence, Shivani took a rare opportunity to move to the USA to pursue her undergraduate degree at St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas, before going on to obtain an MSc in information management at Stevens Institute of Technology, New Jersey.

“One day my dad said quite unexpectedly, ‘I can get you a ticket and one semester’s worth of school money.’ I jumped on it before he could finish his thought. That’s how I ended up in Texas. There, I had three scholarships, three jobs and I finished school in three years. I focused and worked so hard. As soon as I finished college, I found myself an internship on Wall Street.”

Shivani was committed to seeing her siblings receive the same American opportunities she did. She supported her sister and, together, the family helped their brother through academic studies.

“All this was not going to happen if I didn’t have a strong, lucrative job with a stable life. When we all had master’s degrees and my siblings were happily off on their own successful career paths, I found that I was free. Suddenly, after all this time, I found that I didn’t have to take care of anyone!” she said. “It was a strange feeling, one that was equally freeing and disorienting for a long while before I really began to enjoy it.”

Forming a new partnership through friendship

Shivani planned a trip to Mauritius to celebrate her thirtieth birthday, and all that she had accomplished – and it was there that she and Jessica met.

Jessica recalled: “We just had this [great] chemistry right away. We got into these conversations about what was wrong with the world and the major social issues on the ground. We connected because we both really wanted to make a difference.”

Over the next several years, Jessica and Shivani remained in contact, always discussing how they could start something to make a difference in the world. Shivani decided to leave her job (and life) on Wall Street, and to give everything to this potential project with Jessica. “I started studying, volunteering and learning everything I could on international development. I learned it all from scratch, and I dedicated myself to helping to build this business with Jess.” At the same time, Jessica learned all she could about business and financing for development.

Both women agree that they started their business before they were 100 per cent ready. “Would we ever be completely ready? Probably not. We just went for it,” Shivani said. “We hit the ground running and we haven’t looked back.”

Jessica said: "I was working for a Brussels-based consultancy at the time and was seven months pregnant when Shivani suggested we give it a go. I was about to have my first child and felt ready for the challenge; it was a time for new beginnings! I felt now was as good as time as any to work on something I was passionate about and put my experience towards starting my own consultancy."

The pair saw immediately what they had planned for a business could be successful, and they put all their energy into developing the project, building a team of advisers, and presenting their idea.

"We found supporters and advisers by blatantly reaching out to everybody we wanted, and most people declined politely. A few were impressed by our courage. We just kept at it really, learning and improving what we could, with every interaction and experience. We pushed [the business] through with sheer force of will. We just committed ourselves to becoming experts in our field," Shivani said.

Overcoming challenges to create an innovative business

Since they started PATHFINDER, Jessica and Shivani have worked face to face on a handful of occasions. Most of their work is done via phone and computer, sharing information through text messages and on virtual meeting platforms, coordinating tasks, communications and calendars.

Shivani said: "Our geographical challenges have been surprisingly non-existent. We were always going to do this together, but never going to live in the same place, and that was just our reality. We knew that going in."

PATHFINDER is currently funded through client services such as strategy and management consulting, educational workshops, business management and training, as well as project management, and policy papers for governments. The women learned early that getting investment, without a product to sell, would be difficult.

"When you're an innovative model and you haven't yet piloted, you don't have anything to display but your own backgrounds. There are no prototypes to show, and no implementations, successes or failures to report. We had little to offer but our word. We were simply not investible. Also, it didn't help that the metrics and financial modelling that our industry requires is not something investors fully understood or were comfortable backing just yet," Shivani said.

Instead, PATHFINDER pivoted its strategy. "We focused entirely on building our credibility through our work. We understood that what we needed was to prove ourselves, one client at a time," Shivani said.

Consequently, through receiving feedback from investors and organizations dedicated to change-making, as well as gaining a strong board of advisers, Jessica and Shivani hope to be able soon to use a piloted model to get into the impact investing market.

PATHFINDER continues to support women's empowerment through consulting for women-led social enterprises. "A lot of our clients are female leaders, and feminist men. We are surrounded by women in this industry, both on the ground and at the policy level. We are also involved in youth and gender empowerment discussions at the national level in Canada and the US."

Jessica and Shivani hope their work developing PATHFINDER is an inspiration for others to chart their own course as the name of the company hints. Shivani shared: “You can do business and you can do good in the world while doing it.”

Jessica advises any up-and-coming entrepreneur to take the leap. “But you have to reflect and understand why you’re doing it. Is there a need for it? Do you want to do it? Being good at something isn’t enough. And if you wait until you’re officially ready, no one will ever start anything. You can only regret what you didn’t try and do.”

PATHFINDER signed the Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) in July 2020 to remain on track for sustainability and inclusion as the business grows. Jessica and Shivani will continue to ensure the WEPs are aligned with their own mission.

“We want to be a part of [the WEPs] network, to learn and give back. It’s all about learning and exchanging with the network,” Jessica said.

Women’s Empowerment Principles



High-level corporate leadership



Workplace HR



Employee well-being and safety



Education and training for women




Supplier diversity & marketing practices




Community engagement



Measurement and reporting

 weps.org

 weps@unwomen.org

 [@WEPrinciples](https://twitter.com/WEPrinciples)

 [@Empower_Women](https://twitter.com/Empower_Women)

Funded by:



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EMPOWERMENT
PRINCIPLES**

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