

Entrepreneurship In Unexpected Places: An Interview with Vithika Yadav of Love Matters

Carrie Rich



Companies with a female founder performed 63% better than investments with all-male founding teams, according to an analysis of 10-years of data by [First Round](#). Women in entrepreneurship still face an uphill battle, despite how much as we have progressed in the United States. As Co-Founder and CEO of [The Global Good Fund](#), I have had to overcome [numerous challenges](#) building my business and proving myself as an effective leader.

When looking at the the bigger picture, I'm curious about how women across the world build their respective platforms. What happens when women pursue entrepreneurship in unexpected places?

One example of this phenomenon is [Rania Kinge](#), a social entrepreneur based in Damascus, Syria, who is running an artisanal jewelry and design enterprise called [I Love Syria](#). While the political instability and security discourages many from starting businesses in Syria, Rania has invested everything she has in I love Syria, which creates employment opportunities and betters the livelihoods of widows and daughters on both sides of the Syrian conflict.

Another example of an inspiring entrepreneur is Vithika Yadav who I had the privilege of meeting at the [THNK School of Creative Leadership](#) in Amsterdam. I remain impressed by her work as human rights professional, with over ten years of experience focused on human trafficking, modern day slavery, sexual rights and gender rights.

What peaked my interest about Vithika is her courage to be a leader on [Project Love Matters](#) in India. Love Matters is the first ever website in India to give complete, honest and unbiased information on love, sex and relationships in India.

How does Vithika lead a business in a country where it is atypical for women to start or lead businesses, let alone run businesses that revolve around sensitive topics, such as sexual education?

Here is Vithika's story:

What was the driving force for you to become a human rights activist and make it your mission to promote sex education in India (and across the globe)? Was it a specific moment or a progression of numerous observations and events?

I didn't explicitly plan on a career in human rights, though I've had clarity about caring for human rights and justice issues since I was young.

I do believe that to a large extent our attitudes are moulded directly and indirectly by our life experiences. At an early age, my parents taught me to care about justice, respect, and equality. They gave me the space to argue, question and voice my opinion. These experiences helped me make connection between my own life experiences and larger social issues in the society.

After receiving my Masters, I felt paralyzed by my inability to choose from an infinite number of things I wanted to do. Taking my interest on rights issues forward, I secured an internship with an anti-trafficking organization in Delhi. For me, that experience was the start of a journey. There has been no looking back since. Never before was I more convinced that this is what I wanted to do with my life. When you are working on issues like slavery, you are addressing issues like gender inequality, sexual violence, abuse, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, poverty, illiteracy and many more.

I had just finished working on a radio project on Bonded Labour with BBC Media Action when this idea of having an innovative sexual health platform came by. The reason I decided to work on Love Matters was because it was connected to my personal experience of growing up in India. I grew up in an environment where ignorance, hypocrisy and denial around sex, sexual health and sexuality ruled our society.

I myself grew up with so many myths and misconceptions around sex. I still remember how my biology teacher skipped the page on male and female reproductive systems, asking us to do self-study on that chapter. Any discussion of these topics was possible only in discreet tones. We were told that 'nice' kids are not supposed to take any interest in 'these' things. It was the accumulation of such observations and experiences that pushed me to pursue Love Matters.

Love Matters shares news on love, relationships and sex education for young adults around the world. How do you make difficult topics more comfortable to discuss?

At Love Matters, we believe that if we provide young people with honest and positive information on sex, they'll be more likely to have safer, healthier sex. We also believe that the sexual and reproductive decisions made by today's youth will have great impact on their personal lives and on society. Access to good information on sexual and reproductive health is a human right - but one which is often thwarted by government agencies or social forces and other traditional gatekeepers in many countries, as opposed to free speech.

To combat this, we use pleasure as a hook to have difficult conversations with millions of young men and women. Our starting point at Love Matters is that sex and relationships should be happy, healthy, and based on equality in every way. We do this in an open, honest and non-judgemental way, which makes it easier for people to trust us and feel comfortable discussing their issues and seeking information. This is a very unique starting point for a country like India.

Your organization operates in India where talking about sex is not the norm. What steps do you take to navigate sensitive territory that could be applied in other entrepreneurial settings?

In India, talking about sex is still a taboo. Sex is a topic that even today brings in feelings of shame and embarrassment, guilt and inadequacy to many people in India.

There were three success factors to building Love Matters in India that can be applied to so many other entrepreneurial ventures across the globe:

Fill an unmet need: When we launched Love Matters, it was about filling in an existing need. There's a perception in India that young people shouldn't be having sex, so what sexual health issues could they be having? But, according to the data, the reality is that the age of sexual initiation is getting younger and people don't want to talk about it. We want to reinvent the way our nation addresses sexual health issues.

Do extensive research in your sector: Our research in Delhi and Mumbai informed us that most young people wanted information about sexual health and preferred receiving this information privately (e.g. via internet and mobile phones). Yet, there was no online platform available in India that gave simple, honest, non-judgemental information on sexuality and sexual health issues.

We spoke to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) organizations in India and they too felt online platforms would positively build on their existing work. This is how Love Matters India began in 2011.

The upfront research helped create a successful business model down the road. Love Matters Indian sites alone have had more than 12 million visits to date. We have a community of more than [600,000 Facebook followers](#), making us the most popular SRH page in India on Facebook.

I feel really proud looking at how Love Matters has now expanded to Kenya, China, Mexico and Egypt.

Make your enterprise accessible to your target audience: Love Matters is a responsive website that is easily accessible on any mobile phone. And mobile phones offer access to sensitive information anonymously, privately, and at any time. By targeting mobile phones, we are bypassing traditional gatekeepers to provide information we know people are looking for.

In 2013, Love Matters won an award for our Indian and Spanish websites from the World Association of Sexual Health for excellence and innovation in reaching large numbers of young people in "challenging" settings. This award is important validation because Love Matters is a free speech project; we're giving people a space to talk about things they couldn't talk about before. And the demand for this information is coming from our target audience - young people.

How has your personal life affected the way you run your business - and vice versa?

I feel I am extremely fortunate to have had experienced positive relationships in my life. Both of my parents have been my inspiration - people who fearlessly stood for rights and justice. We come from a small city in Rajasthan called Alwar; it's a very conservative city. Men commonly control many aspects of the lives of women in the community.

My family was completely different. My father is really the one who created the positive image of men in my life - he not only believed in gender equality, he lived gender equality in his everyday life. Both of my parents encouraged me to be independent and do what I aspired to do. I have these values ingrained in my system now. From them I learned that equality can only be won when everyone is equipped to claim it for themselves; when they are made aware of unequal power relations; when they are able to think and act on their own behalf, exercise choice, speak out with strong voices and have their views taken into account.

As far as my married life goes, I married out of my caste - which was a big deal in our society. But my parents supported my decision and with my husband I share values and principles that are of utmost importance to me in my

life. I bring these values and positivity to the work I do.

What core values do you embrace as an entrepreneur?

First and foremost, passion. I think it is extremely important to be passionate about what you do because only then would you be willing to commit to something you work on even if you fall, stumble or fail.

Honesty and transparency are also key values for positive societal impact. Being genuine and transparent, both internally and externally, are extremely important values that lay the foundation for what you build and take you the distance to make what you build successful long term.

I also value creativity and innovation because I think creative freedom helps one invent breakthrough ideas. Creative freedom helps me take risks. I am hungry to learn. I get inspired by new ideas and by the amazing people I work with, and these realities push me to think better and do better than I would otherwise.

Finally, I'm an absolute believer in teamwork and working together with other people, where you share successes (and also failures). That's how we grow, learn, improvise and create together.

I try to demonstrate these values daily. If my day-to-day actions do not support my core values, then I am failing as an entrepreneur, as a leader, and as an individual.

What was your biggest failure as an entrepreneur and how did you evolve from this experience?

I once made the mistake of listening to those who did not believe enough in my ideas. I let their perspective affect and hurt me. I would be so upset about any negativity around what I wanted to do. And that was a total mistake.

I later realized that as an entrepreneur, when you think differently and do something that has not been done before, of course, there will be resistance from many people. You need critics as much as you need supporters for your idea. It will help you clarify your risks and assumptions. So I have learned to embrace negativity in ways that push me forward, rather than hold me back.

If you could go back in time and give your 18-year-old self one piece of advice, what would it be?

When I was 18, I lived under the self-pressure of trying to prove my success, to make people happy, and to do what others expected of me in society.

I would tell myself, "Vithika, society will do everything in its power to convince you that your career, the money you make, marriage, and your children are the things that mark your life successful and happy. These aspects of life may affect one's success and happiness, but life isn't only about those dimensions. Life is about what you choose to do without feeling forced into anything. Always be true to yourself and do not make decisions just to please others. Follow your passion and enjoy the journey it takes you on."