# INVISIBLE TO VISIBLE

## Women Entrepreneurs with Disabilities

### Stories from South Asia

## Youth 4 Jobs Foundation

Youth4Jobs Foundation is an action organisation with a heart working to ensure youth with disabilities can be poverty-free in India. Our focus is on building resilient livelihoods for both youth with disabilities, with a focus on the most vulnerable, women with disabilities. Towards this, we partner with governments, markets, and civil society to remove physical and attitudinal barriers and enable the scaling of evidence-based effective solutions. It is led by Meera Shenoy who has the unique experience of working in senior government positions, the World Bank and UNDP. This transformational work has won several national and international awards. Our initiatives include SwarajAbility, a job platform representing 21 disabilities, and the Global Ability Photography Challenge through NotJustArtGlobal, aimed at promoting the work of disabled visual artists.

## Zero Project

Founded by Austrian non-profit Essl Foundation in 2008, the Zero Project is a global and research-driven initiative to support the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

It focuses its efforts on the topics of Education, Employment, Accessibility, Independent Living and Political Participation & ICT. Over the past decade, Zero Project has established a global network of 10,000+ experts, policy makers, corporates, academics, and other persons with and without disabilities who are advancing the implementation of the CRPD. This network contributes to the Zero Project's work and continues to grow, fostering a global community for disability inclusion.

*Cover Image Credits: Sharlin Akhter, an inspiring photographer from Bangladesh, defies the challenges of cerebral palsy, including paralysis of her right hand and limited balance in her right leg, to capture the essence of diverse livelihoods through her photography. Her creativity and resilience shine through in her powerful visual storytelling.*

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# SOUTH ASIA LANDSCAPE

## Introduction to the Region

South Asia, comprising countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives, and Afghanistan, is a region rich in cultural diversity and contrasts. Each country offers a unique tapestry of traditions, languages, and social norms that shape the lives of its people. This region's complex cultural attitudes towards disability and gender are deeply intertwined with its religious and societal norms, creating a diverse yet challenging landscape for marginalised communities, especially persons with disabilities.

## Social and Economic Diversity

South Asia is characterised by significant social and economic diversity. From the bustling urban centres of India to the remote villages of Nepal, the disparity in access to resources, education, and healthcare is stark. This economic diversity influences how disabilities are perceived and managed across different communities. Persons with disabilities in South Asia often face numerous barriers, including physical, informational, and systemic obstacles that hinder their full participation in society.

## Cultural Attitudes Towards Disability and Gender

In many South Asian societies, disability is often viewed through a lens of stigma and marginalisation. Cultural and religious interpretations of disability can significantly impact a family's readiness to cope with impairment. Family members are typically the primary caregivers, which can lead to feelings of burden and resentment, particularly in economically disadvantaged households. This caregiving dynamic is further complicated by societal norms that place a higher value on men, leaving women and girls with disabilities more vulnerable to neglect and abuse.

# COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

## Afghanistan

Afghanistan has one of the highest prevalence rates of disability in the region, largely due to ongoing conflict. Disabilities resulting from war (*malul*) receive more societal acceptance and support compared to hereditary disabilities (*mayub*), which face severe stigma. Women and girls with disabilities in Afghanistan face compounded discrimination and limited opportunities for education and employment.

## Bangladesh

Bangladesh was one of the first countries to adopt the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and has made legislative strides with its disability law. However, people with disabilities, particularly women and girls, continue to face significant challenges in education and employment. The economic impact of disability is substantial, with exclusion costing the nation an estimated 1.7% of its GDP.

## India

In India, persons with disabilities account for an estimated 2.1% of the population, though this figure is likely underestimated. Urban areas have more resources and support services, but rural regions remain underserved. Women and girls with disabilities are at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse. India has implemented reservations in government jobs for various disability categories, but access to these opportunities remains limited.

### Nepal

Nepal was the first country in the region to pass a formal disability law in 1982. Despite progressive policies, discrimination and stigma persist. Girls and women with disabilities face significant barriers to education and healthcare, and economic participation remains low, largely supported by non-governmental organisations.

### Pakistan

Pakistan's legislative efforts for disability inclusion have been slow, with a National Policy on Disability established in 2002. Men with disabilities have better access to education and employment than women, who face societal stigma and limited opportunities. Disability-related employment options are scarce due to a lack of skills training and employer support.

### Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has enacted several laws to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, including the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. However, implementation is slow, and societal attitudes still pose significant barriers.

### Intersectionality of Gender and Disability

Women and girls with disabilities in South Asia face triple discrimination: due to their gender, poverty, and disability. They often remain hidden and their rights ignored, particularly in rural areas where access to education, healthcare, and rehabilitation services is severely limited. Societal norms and discriminatory practices further exacerbate their marginalisation, making it essential to create supportive environments that enable their full participation in society.

## Policy and Legal Framework

All eight countries in South Asia have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), reflecting a commitment to improving the lives of persons with disabilities. However, the implementation of disability-inclusive policies varies significantly across the region. Laws and policies need to be backed by political will, adequate funding, and technical expertise to be effective.

Excluding persons with disabilities from the workforce has a significant economic impact. The International Labour Organization estimates that this exclusion results in a loss of 3-7% of GDP in low-income countries. Engaging persons with disabilities in the workforce not only promotes inclusion but also drives economic growth.

## CONCLUSION

South Asia presents a complex landscape for persons with disabilities, characterised by cultural diversity, economic disparities, and evolving legal frameworks. Addressing the needs of women and girls with disabilities requires a multifaceted approach that includes changing societal attitudes, improving access to education and healthcare, and implementing inclusive policies effectively. By fostering a more inclusive environment, South Asia can unlock the potential of all its citizens, driving social and economic progress across the region

# FOREWORD


MEERA SHENOY
**CEO & FOUNDER - Youth4Jobs**

Empowering underprivileged youth has been my mission for over two decades. Throughout this journey, I have witnessed how transformative a job or enterprise can be, especially for the most vulnerable. Our pioneering initiative, WEDO, launched at Zero Project Vienna, is a testament to this belief. It focuses on helping the most disadvantaged – women with disabilities – to become entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurship offers women with disabilities more than just income; it provides independence, flexibility and they become Changemakers and inspirations within their communities, moving from Invisible to Visible. Our first WEDO booklet was a resounding success, showcasing the incredible stories of women entrepreneurs with disabilities from India, who have overcome significant odds to achieve their dreams. No one had heard these stories before. We followed this with discussion forums and as a lone voice highlighted this intersectional issue in gender conferences.

As we launch the second edition of the WEDO booklet, we expand our vision to South Asia. We believe that the challenges faced by women with disabilities are universal, and so are the solutions.

Finding women entrepreneurs with disabilities is not easy .. For this booklet, multiple organisations and partners supported us generously. And these are the seeds of the WEDO network.

And these seeds will germinate in different parts of the world, giving women with disabilities a distinct voice. A WEDO network which has a myriad of colours woven together for a brighter tapestry of our future...

**Meera Shenoy**
**Founder-CEO**
**Youth4Jobs**

# FOREWORD

MICHAEL FEMBEK

**CEO - Zero Project**

As a global initiative committed to finding and sharing innovative solutions for persons with disabilities, the Zero Project is working for a world with zero barriers. Our mission is reflected in our efforts to build bridges between the global disability inclusion community by fostering international cooperation and supporting the transfer of innovative solutions to new countries and regions.

To this end – and with the objective of overcoming language, cultural or geographical barriers – the Zero Project pursues strategic partnerships in Latin America, the Asia Pacific, and India. At the Zero Project, we take immense pride of having Youth4Jobs as an esteemed strategic partner to drive innovation in India. Their WeDo initiative stands as a beacon of positive change, highlighting a group that is often overlooked and underrepresented: women with disabilities.

Women with disabilities face unique challenges due to intersectional discrimination, confronting barriers that impact their daily lives. This booklet beautifully illustrates how entrepreneurship can serve as a powerful vehicle of transformation. As a catalyst for innovation, women entrepreneurs with disabilities create solutions that resonate far beyond their immediate communities. By doing so, they move from invisibility to visibility, demonstrating the courage to break stereotypes and redefine what is possible.

The Zero Project is committed to supporting WeDo in its mission to build bridges to the international community. Together, through initiatives like WeDo, we are one step closer to a world with zero barriers.

**Michael Fembek**
**CEO**
**Zero Project**

# AFGHANISTAN

## ROBABA MOHAMMADI

Tetraplegia

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## ROBABA MOHAMMADI

Robaba Mohammadi was born in the year 2000, in the Ghazni province of Afghanistan, in a village named Malistan. Her disability at birth is believed to have been influenced by the close genetic relationship between her parents, who are immediate cousins. Since Malistan happened to be quite remote, her family did not have access to any hospital or medical facilities close by.

It was for this reason that Robaba received no treatment for her condition until she was three years old. Afterward, Robaba and her family moved to the capital city of Kabul where they regularly visited the hospital for her to receive the care she required.

Robaba had four other siblings, and the task of looking after four young children while taking a fifth daily to the hospital became difficult for her mother. Her treatment eventually stopped, and Robaba began to spend all her time at home. There was no reason left for her to go outside and see the world; she rarely saw the sky, the sun, the stars or the moon. Afghanistan barely had good roads for people to walk, "where would there be roads for a wheelchair?" Robaba questions.

While her brothers and sisters went off to school to learn and meet their friends, she was all alone.

There was no school for people with disabilities in Afghanistan, and as a person with a disability, she was only considered a disgrace to herself, her family and to society. Before she knew it, many years passed; one day she was eight and then the next, she was fourteen years old.

Robaba had gone into a deep depression. She had become sick of watching movies, staring at her reflection in the mirror and seeing her family members around her. Then one day, Robaba decided to do something different, she started to learn. She tried to write, first with her feet. But the pain was difficult to bear, so she held the pencil in her mouth instead. Her siblings who were learning things at school every day began to teach her.

They taught her the alphabet, spelling, writing words and correct pronunciations. Soon, she was helping them do their homework when they were back from school. She became perfect at it, and was able to read any book. Alongside this, Robaba began to draw. She enjoyed working with colours, and soon her talent caught the attention of her sisters, who eagerly asked her to create drawings for them.

Robaba's talent also captured the interest of a family friend who encouraged her to take her art seriously. He taught her shading techniques and provided books, papers, and art supplies, which she used diligently despite occasional frustrations.

When a relative returning from abroad admired her paintings and requested to take some, she exchanged them for a smartphone to create a Facebook account. Posting her drawings online led to criticism, leaving her disheartened until one day, in a moment of despair, she shared her story with a candid photo. This post caught the eye of a TV journalist who was amazed by her ability to draw with her mouth. He invited her to share her journey on a TV show, where her resilience and extraordinary talent could inspire countless others.

After her TV appearance, Robaba's fame soared globally. Admirers flooded her with phone calls and art supplies, commissioning portraits from around the world. She enrolled in classes with six different teachers to hone her skills, creating a packed daily schedule. Her life had transformed. Exhibitions in Bamyan, Kabul, Herat, and Turkey followed, with thousands of attendees, and they all culminated in the establishment of the Robaba Cultural Art Center in Kabul in 2019, where she taught various art forms.

She ensured the building was accessible to those with physical disabilities,and soon had many students joining. However, as Robaba started becoming popular, she, her siblings and coworkers began to also receive threats from people. There was once a bomb scare, forcing her family to shift houses to maintain anonymity. She and her siblings briefly relocated to the UAE as well.

Returning to Afghanistan amidst the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, Robaba and her family endured two years under house arrest, where she particularly felt trapped as a person with a disability. Determined to secure safety, they reluctantly left their home country and relocated to Pakistan. From here, Robaba applied for residency in several countries, receiving immediate offers from Germany, Australia, and the USA.

Her dream, however, was Canada, where she and her sister eventually gained permanent residency in April 2024. Overjoyed, Robaba aims to learn English, earn an art degree, and reopen her centre in Canada to teach painting and drawing.

Despite facing numerous obstacles, she has emerged triumphant. Robaba encourages parents of children with disabilities to not fall into pessimism, but rather to support their child, nurture their talents and believe in the potential of every individual. Her journey from confinement to international recognition has empowered her to inspire others with her message of resilience and self-acceptance.

# BANGLADESH

## AREFA PARVIN

Speech and Hearing Impairment

*SOPNOCHAYA*

## AREFA PARVIN

Arefa Parvin, hailing from Natore, Bangladesh, enjoyed a normal childhood like any other, until her life took a turn in class 9. She began experiencing stiffness and pain in her joints, unaware of the cause. Eventually diagnosed with arthritis, the condition progressively affected her hands and legs.

The pain became so unbearable after a point, that it significantly impaired her ability to walk and even use her hands. Despite the unbearable pain, she continued attending school, where her parents sought medical help. With ongoing treatment, Arefa now manages to walk and use her hands, albeit with significant difficulty.

Through the challenges and ups and downs of life, Arefa always nurtured an unshakeable passion for handicrafts. She began making dresses and other items, selling them at her house in Natore, where people would come just to buy from her.

She also had a job at an organisation of persons with disabilities (OPD), ADD International, where she was posted in Sirajganj.

She tried her best to keep her small clothing venture running alongside it. But balancing both work and business all by herself became taxing, prompting her to hire four more people to assist her with production.

She also continued to work, despite the pain in her hands, since it gave her immense satisfaction.

Soon she expanded her skills by learning to make wooden ornaments from online tutorials. She established an online page called "*Sopnochaya*" to showcase and sell various handicraft products, like different types of ornaments. She also began employing others to help with production. Although small, her business was running well and showed a lot of promise.

However, she faced a turning point when she had to leave her job to look after her young child. Amidst these challenges, she also underwent surgery in her hand, limiting her ability to create handicrafts for an extended period.

She sold previously crafted products to continue running her business, but faced another setback with a hand injury from an accident, resulting in hospitalisation and a temporary halt to her entrepreneurial pursuits.

Presently, her business remains paused as she focuses on recovering from her health issues. Despite these trials, Arefa remains resolute in her determination to revive her business.

Her journey reflects resilience in pursuing her passion despite health setbacks, highlighting her determination to overcome obstacles and revive her business endeavours when circumstances allow.

**HASHI KHATUN**
Locomotor

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## HASHI KHATUN

After losing both legs in a tragic train accident and facing dire financial circumstances, life took a challenging turn for Hashi Khatun. Her family's condition was not good, so she had nothing left after paying the medical expenses except some support from the Social Work Department.

“I fell on the rocks” Hashi expresses. Determined to support her family, she began sewing with old clothes and selling basic groceries like onions, chilies, and potatoes. Her entrepreneurial journey officially began in 2000 when she started her own clothing business.

Joining a Community-Based Organization, she secured loans to purchase equipment, like a sewing machine, yarn and fabric. She also supplemented her income by taking sewing classes for other individuals. But one day her equipment was stolen, and Hashi had to start her business again from scratch. She refused to give up.
Her resilience shone through as she reinvested earnings to restart her venture.

By 2023, she formally registered her business as Hashi Boutique House and transitioned to online sales from home, having previously operated a showroom in the city of Bogura.

Her efforts haven't gone unnoticed; she has been recognized with numerous accolades, including an award from ActionAid in 2012, accompanied by financial support of 20,000 Taka.

More recently, she received awards from BSCIC (Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation) and Baishakhi Mela, as well as the Women Entrepreneur Award.

Her dedication to community service led her to serve as the elected president of a local organisation of persons with disabilities (OPD), where she arranged free sewing classes and facilitated government allowances for participants.

At that time, she arranged to teach free sewing to people with disabilities. She also provided them with allowances from the government.

Beyond business, she is a poet and author of her own book. Presently residing in a precarious economic situation once more, in Bogura, she continues to source materials for her business, personally overseeing production and occasionally crafting products herself.

Despite current challenges, her unwavering spirit and determination remain the driving forces behind her entrepreneurial journey and community contributions.

## KEYA AKTER

Locomotor

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## KEYA AKTER

Keya Akter hails from Enayetpur, Sirajganj, and her early childhood was akin to that of any other child, with play and laughter. It was not until a fateful day when she fell ill, that her life changed forever. Diagnosed with typhoid and lacking adequate treatment, she developed a walking disability that permanently damaged her limbs.

Later, in 1998, she moved to Dhaka, settling in Mohammadpur, where every day became a battle due to her mobility challenges. “Each day becomes a war-like situation for me to survive and overcome”, expresses Keya.

Despite her struggles, she pursued education up to class 10, although she faced setbacks and was unable to clear the SSC board exams. To support her family financially, she turned to providing tuition classes to students and applying her tailoring skills which she had learned through prior experience.

The government also provided a disability allowance of 850 Taka per month to 100,000 beneficiaries of which she was one. However, this amount proved to be inadequate for Keya to sustain her entire household for a month. She felt that financial constraints had and always would be a part of her life because of her family’s low-income economic status.

But Keya didn’t let these realities dull her dreams. She had been driven by a childhood ambition for entrepreneurship, and decided that one day she would in fact set up her own business. She initially relinquished this dream due to her hardships and disabilities. But she found renewed inspiration from her mother and younger brother's unwavering support and belief in her abilities. Their encouragement provided her with immense courage, dedication, and determination to start her own clothing business. In 2010, she started her venture, financed through a loan to procure products from Chalk Bazaar, a market area in Dhaka, and retail them through her shop.

“Every phase of a disabled person’s life is filled with hardships, challenges, and misfortunes,” says Keya. Her journey as an entrepreneur with a disability had been fraught with challenges and hardships, compounded by the loss of her parents.

They had been the pillars in her life, supporting her through thick and thin. Despite the overwhelming grief and feelings of loss, she decided to overcome the emotional setbacks and ongoing financial struggles, and stay resilient and determined.

Now, even though she has a few financial constraints and mobility issues, she is grateful to God for the gradual improvement in her circumstances, which are much better than before. She strives to give back to her community by contributing to mosques and assisting those in need with her earnings.

Her message is not just for persons with disabilities but also to government and non-governmental entities. She hopes they will provide more financial aid and income opportunities, enabling persons with disabilities like her to lead a life of dignity and independence.

**MINARA BEGUM**
Dwarfism

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## MINARA BEGUM

Minara Begum is a 21-year-old woman from the city of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Born with dwarfism due to a spinal issue and mild speech and hearing impairments, Minara copes with multiple disabilities. One of her older brothers also has a disability, and they navigate life amidst extremely challenging family dynamics. Several years ago, her biological father moved to a foreign country, remarried, and never returned, leaving Minara's family in financial and emotional turmoil.

Her mother remarried three years ago, but her stepfather turned out to be abusive, prompting her mother to leave him. With the assistance of an aunt, they escaped another distressing situation and found refuge under her care. Despite these challenges, Minara possesses a profound passion for art and craft, particularly block batik, sewing, and screen printing. She seized an opportunity to enhance her skills by enrolling in a free vocational training course facilitated by a supportive trainer who believed in her potential. Many doubted she could achieve the targets, but her trainer's belief in her inspired Minara to believe in herself too.

Her dedication and talent in crafting emerged, and people who saw her work wanted to order products from her. This inspired her to start her entrepreneurial journey, selling block batik clothes and dresses, which she has been doing for the past five years. Starting with a modest investment of 3000 Taka, she gradually gained recognition for the quality of her work, attracting customers through word of mouth and pre-orders.

Minara admits she has not adopted any particular marketing strategy for her business. Operating without a physical shop, she manages her business from home and always ensures she has a few sample products available to show potential customers who come over. From sourcing raw materials to crafting the final products, Minara handles everything independently. Minara studied up to class 8, which has helped her in practical ways, like managing the accounts for her business. Over 5 years she has learned to hold the reins of the organisation and steadily expand its customer base.

However, there are many barriers that she faces while working on her business because of her disability. Product collection, marketing, and selling are not easy, so she hasn’t been able to expand the business in the way she would like to. Additionally, due to a lack of financial help, business knowledge and training, physical support, infrastructure, and resources, it is difficult for Minara to build a big business alone despite the high quality of her products. She purchases the raw materials from a market 12-15 km from her house and faces difficulty in travelling due to back pain. To add to it all, businessmen do not treat her the same way they treat others, showing a consistent lack of trust in her due to her disability. Due to these constraints, receiving financial support or a loan is also extremely difficult for her.

Despite these barriers, her business generates a monthly income of 3,000 to 5,000 Taka, helping her meet her own needs and contribute significantly to her family's financial stability. The business has provided economic relief and boosted her self-confidence and resilience.

Looking ahead, she aspires to expand her business and dreams of receiving further training, improving her physical condition, and securing financial assistance to achieve her entrepreneurial goals. Through her trainer’s support in finding the right sewing machine for her height, she hopes to make more tailored garments. She remains determined to succeed, believing that with the right support and opportunities, she can build a successful future despite the challenges posed by her disability.

## NARGIS AKTER SHARIFA

Dwarfism

*BHORER ALO-MOHILA*
*KOLLYAN SANGSTHA*

## NARGIS AKTER SHARIFA

Nargis Akter Sharifa is the founder of "Bhorer Alo-Mohila Kollyan Sangstha," a pioneering organisation that champions the inclusion of marginalised and underprivileged groups such as women, persons with disabilities, youth, and older individuals. She produces clothing, handicrafts, food products, cosmetics and sells them at local markets. Additionally, she offers block-batik and handicrafts training.

She provides financial assistance, including small loans, opening savings accounts, acquiring government support services, for people in her community. Nargis has received an award from ACCESS Bangladesh foundation in 2012 and also got the Best Joyeeta Award in 2014 for her initiative.

Starting her journey in 2006, Nargis transitioned from her previous work in a poultry farm and with an organisation, ADD, supporting persons with disabilities, where she advocated for their voting rights. She also helped there in voter registration. As a person with a disability, Nargis felt their pain and suffering as if it was her own. She made a vow to herself that she would start something of her own, to work with them and for them.

Her husband was extremely supportive, initially suggesting she focus on food products like 'Daaler bori', a Bengali delicacy of dried lentil dumplings, and pickles. However, Nargis pivoted to cosmetic products, as food products require extra hygiene and quality assurance, which would be challenging for her diverse group of producers.

She wanted everyone to feel at home and complete their projects at their own pace. Members with disabilities participated in production, packaging, and marketing, allowing them to contribute meaningfully. “It was quite a successful venture and I used to sell these goods in different districts at different divisions”, she says.

Despite early successes, her business faced severe setbacks during political unrest in 2014 and further challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Market conditions became dire, causing loss of local dealers and hampering marketing efforts during lockdowns. Nargis recalls that during those times, it was impossible to survive as a business. Not only did she get infected by the COVID virus, but she also spent a lot of her time helping the members of the organisation and others from the community to recover from the crisis. She tried to arrange relief material but struggled to receive stimulus packages due to bureaucratic hurdles. While navigating these challenges, she received training from BSCIC (Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation), support from the Department of Women Affairs, and assistance from the DC office for her most vulnerable members.

While she engaged actively and regularly in local fairs and exhibitions, it became untenable during lockdowns, complicating her dual roles of managing her business and household, which included caring for her young daughter, a 4th-grade student. Despite these challenges, her determination remained steadfast and she has never lost hope. She continues to recruit and train persons with disabilities, older adults, unemployed youth, and student apprentices, focusing on activities like paper bag making and designing products for other businesses and organisations. With the support of her family and husband, she looks forward to fully dedicating herself to her business once her daughter becomes more independent. Her resilience and hope remain strong as she plans to overcome pandemic-induced losses and revive her venture, reaffirming her commitment to empowering marginalised communities through entrepreneurship and inclusion.

## RAYHANA TAMANNA

Locomotor

*HRIDHI’S SHOP*

## RAYHANA TAMANNA

Rayhanna was born on 15th August, 2000 on the National Day of Mourning in Bangladesh. Thought to be a bad omen, her relatives linked her day of birth to be the reason she was born with disabilities - impairing her arm, leg and speech. In truth, her condition resulted from an improperly managed delivery; her father, unable to transport her pregnant mother to a hospital, encountered an untrained attendant who mishandled the procedure.

Growing up in her village, Rayhanna faced prejudice early on. Forbidden from kitchen activities due to her disabilities, she quietly honed her cooking skills through YouTube tutorials on her phone. Her education was marked by challenges; she endured bullying in school, labelled as "mental" by peers. At just 13, during a solitary exam with an interpreter, a teacher harassed and insulted her due to her disability. Despite these obstacles, Rayhanna persisted, achieving high grades until the increasing academic demands of high school posed greater challenges. She points out that she has never found any measures that are inclusive or supportive for people like her, as she can’t work at the same speed as other people. But she decided to take it in her stride.

Now 24, Rayhanna continues to live with her family, in the city of Dhaka and pursues an Honours degree in English at Mirpur Bangla College while managing "Hridhi's Shop," a small food enterprise named after her family. She rightly chose food items instead of clothing, which would have required far more capital and led to trouble in sourcing. Further, clothing items would require retailing, while she could make food items on her own and ensure high quality.

Rayhanna manages this business online, on Facebook, with support from family members. Her father helps her source raw materials and her mother provides her assistance in product preparation.

When she began the enterprise, Rayhanna had just about 1200 Taka. Since then, her business has grown, albeit with fluctuating monthly earnings reaching around 5000 Taka during peak sales. Her product range has also expanded significantly from her initial days. Rayhanna is now well known for food items like sweets, *bokorkhani* (a spiced flaky flatbread from the region), homemade cake, pure mustard oil, pure ghee (or clarified butter), and more. She hopes to also get training to learn new baking techniques.

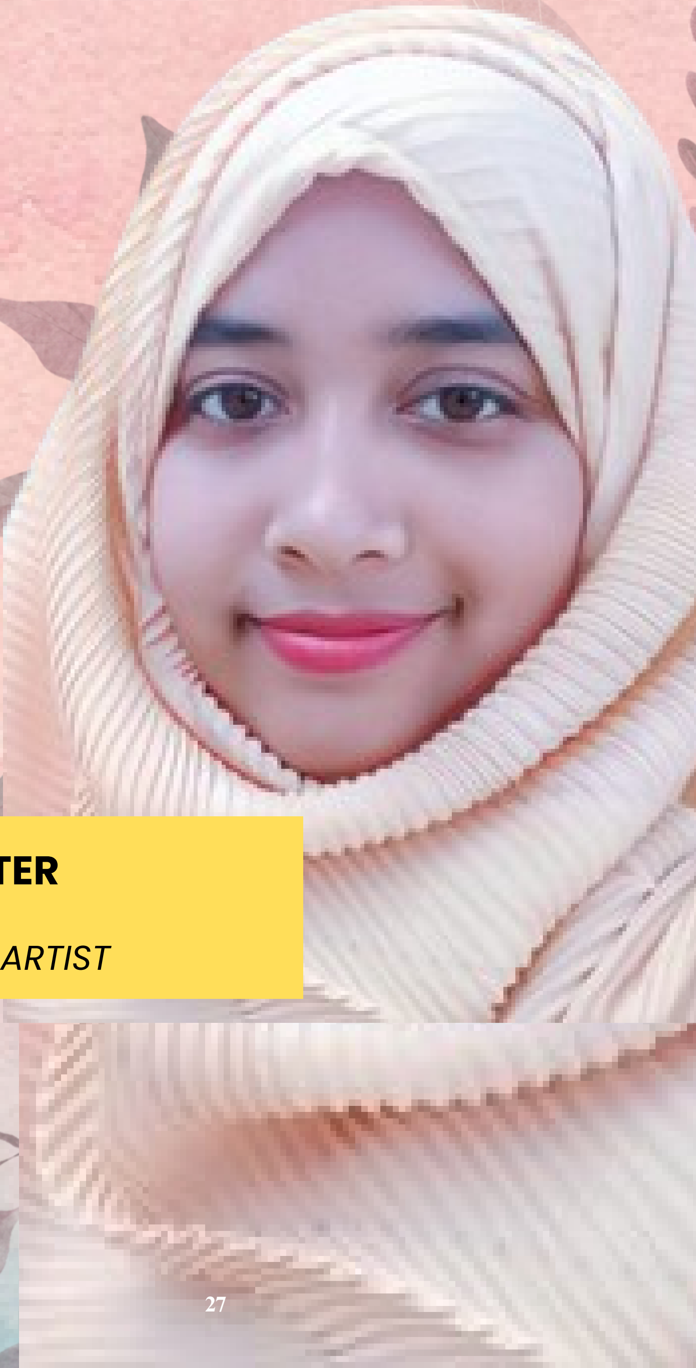
This reflects her consistent dedication to crafting and ensuring product quality. Her father was her first inspiration to start an enterprise- he was a banker by profession, who took out a loan to start a business. But when the business didn't run well, his family faced significant financial strain.

Several years later, Rayhanna followed in her father's footsteps and went on to start a business of her own. She soon became a huge support, contributing to the family from her earnings. She provides for her younger brother's education in an English medium school and aids her parents in day-to-day expenses of the household. Formal business training remains out of reach due to financial constraints and her non-business background.

Yet, Rayhanna remains determined, involved with WE, an organisation supporting entrepreneurs, where she received marketing training. Her next ambition is to transition "Hridhi's Shop" offline by starting a food cart after her exams, acknowledging the lower cost compared to opening a shop.

Rayhanna’s ultimate goal is to expand her enterprise, create job opportunities for persons with disabilities like herself and defy societal expectations concerning disabilities and gender roles. “As a person with disability and a woman, it can be challenging, but I am ready to fight, " mentions Rayhanna.

Through all the societal prejudices and personal struggles in her past and present, Rayhanna finds great solace and pride in her accomplishments. Her peers find her journey inspiring, admiring and respecting her resilience and often requesting her to teach them how to cook too. Rayhanna’s story is one of overcoming adversity with grit and determination, striving for personal growth and societal change.



**RUPALY AKTER**
Locomotor Disability

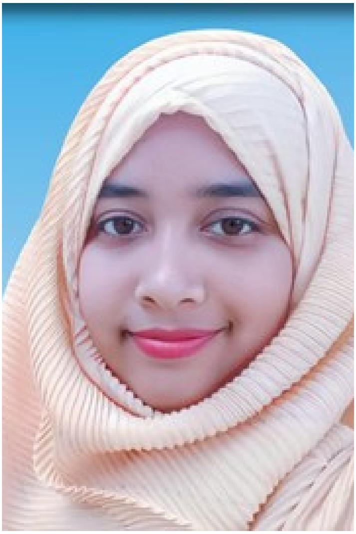
*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## RUPALY AKTER

Rupaly Akter was born in the year 1999, in the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. Despite her locomotor disability, causing weakness in her left leg and right arm, she grew up inspired by her father, a tailor. His creativity motivated her to seek financial independence and support her family. In 2022, she started "Rupaly’s Creation," while also pursuing a master’s degree at Valuka Degree College.

With an initial investment of 5000 Taka, Rupaly began selling clothing items like three-piece salwar sets, shirts and frocks. When customer interest grew, she also started creating products like curtains, pillow cases, bedcovers and home-made food items like pitha (a traditional Bengali pancake or fritter) to her product range. Ever-inspired and looking to learn more, Rupaly has recently ventured into creating handcrafted products too, particularly focusing on crocheted and stitched garments. Now, two years into this venture, she has earned enough capital to expand her investment to 30,000 Taka.

“Rupaly’s Creation”, which began as a Facebook page, has a growing customer base. Despite lacking formal business training, Rupaly innovates with her products and learns by observing other entrepreneurs online. Inspired by successful women entrepreneurs, she adapts to changing customer preferences and continually explores new product avenues. Beyond financial stability, Rupaly's business has transformed her personal life, altering perceptions about her capabilities.



She now is a shining example, proving members of her community wrong, when it comes to what young women with disabilities are capable of. Her earnings support her family, fund her own education, and contribute to her younger brother's schooling. Moreover, her business has begun to have a physical impact on her well-being, since actively engaging her right hand in business activities has notably improved its condition.

Her family remains her pillar of support, assisting with tasks she finds difficult. Against all odds, managing her business independently has enhanced Rupaly’s communication skills, her leadership abilities, and her confidence in herself. While previously, she used to struggle to communicate and often felt insecure because of her disability, she now knows how to interact with customers effectively. Though she sometimes feels like she is always falling behind as a woman and person with a disability, she credits her business venture for boosting her confidence in ways that nothing else has.

In the future, Rupaly is keen to expand her business both online and offline. While she has received some training in social media marketing and communication skills from an organisation providing training and assistance to persons with physical disabilities, Rupaly recognizes the need for further comprehensive business training to sustain and expand her enterprise. She actively seeks out new skills now that can help her grow as a self-made entrepreneur. She dreams that one day, her successful business will help her afford effective treatments for her disability.

Rupaly’s success has inspired others, both with and without disabilities. Recently, she recalls how she was able to encourage a friend who sought her guidance to start her own business. Not only has her entrepreneurial journey proven her abilities, but it has also had a positive impact on her community. This especially gives Rupaly a sense of fulfilment, as she thinks of all the young women with disabilities with potential in her country and how her own journey has transformed her family’s life.

# INDIA

## MADHURI PATURI

Paraplegia

*ANIKA CREATIONS*

## MADHURI PATURI

Madhuri Paturi was born in the year 1973 in Aurangabad, Maharashtra and spent her childhood in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. Unlike her active siblings, she was introverted, worrying her parents. At fifteen, she began participating in sports and debates, eventually completing a commerce degree. All was well, until she turned nineteen and went into a deep depression and tried to put an end to her life.

She had endured years of sexual abuse by several relatives and neighbours from the age of eight. None of her family members knew until that point. Her parents worriedly took her to doctors and psychiatrists to help her get better. It took Madhuri longer to complete her degree. But a few months after the incident, Madhuri had a change of perspective, she cried her heart out one day and finally decided to take the reins of her life into her own hands.

She wanted to own her problems, in a way that no one else could. She made a promise to herself to never let people cross her boundaries again. Madhuri's career then flourished, making her emotionally, physically, and economically independent. However, in 2010, she suffered a fatal car accident that gave her a spinal cord injury and paralysed her lower body for life. She was in a vegetative state for a year and half, a part of which she spent in her childhood home, being looked after by her mother. Later, in 2012, she went for physical rehabilitation after which, she was finally able to do everything on her own again.

Throughout this ordeal, Madhuri remained resilient, focusing on gratitude and her abilities. Madhuri had been married twice, and after the accident her second husband took good care of her for the next ten years. But once the guilt and pain subsided, he did feel the need to leave.

Now separated, Madhuri feels no resentment towards either of her previous partners. Madhuri's strength inspired her family and friends, teaching them to face adversity with courage. She truly believes that there is always something to take away from every situation.

Post rehabilitation, Madhuri started to grow weary of all the time on her hands. One day, her sister who was visiting her from the United States, gave her a jewellery making set, along with several beads, reminding of her childhood passion for jewellery making.

With an investment of 15,000 Indian Rupees from her husband, she turned this hobby into a business in December 2013. Madhuri had several jeweller contacts who taught her the basics, like knotting the end of a string of beads and her friends gave her valuable feedback and offered to take over the photography and marketing of her pieces. Her business began thriving through exhibitions and word-of-mouth.

Madhuri adapted to customer demands by diversifying her product range. She sourced handloom fabrics directly from weavers and expanded into silk saris, building a network of vendors. She also ventured into silver jewellery after studying market trends. She later expanded to every Indian textile from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

More recently, Madhuri has started recycling old clothing to make doormats and cushions. She keeps every last scrap of fabric and thread, putting it together to create mats for the home, and rugs for stray dogs. Her business has become a testament to her resilience and adaptability.

Madhuri credits her family, especially her supportive parents, siblings, husband, friends, and mother-in-law, for her success. Despite life’s ups and downs, she continuously learned and unlearned, embodying her father's lesson: "Accept what is gifted, and acceptance will be gifted to you."

Madhuri also personally does not feel any less because of her disability. While she understands the intent of people who feel sorry for her, it makes her feel disempowered. “Everyone depends on the people around them, to varying degrees… I do all my household chores on my own, I run my own business, I earn my money- so does that make me any less than you?”

## SHARANYA NAGESH NAIK

Attention Deficit Disorder & Visual impairment

*ARIGATO*

## SHARANYA NAGESH NAIK

Sharanya Naik was born in South Portland, Maine, USA. After she and her family moved back to India, she began kindergarten, where her disabilities were first identified. Teachers diagnosed her with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), and visual impairment due to optic nerve damage.

They recommended an assessment by the Maharashtra Dyslexia Association (MDA). Until class 4, Sharanya attended a regular ICSE school, after which she moved to two special schools, first JBCN Pan Academy and then Asmita Learning Centre, where she continued until class 10. Like any other parent, Sharanya's mother, Jay Mehta first found it extremely difficult to accept that her child had learning disabilities. She tried her best to be involved in Sharanya's learning but as a single mom and the sole breadwinner, Jay needed to seek all the possible support for Sharanya as well. Spending time with Sharanya when she did her homework, Jay soon noticed her unique way of understanding things, like identifying the letter A as a triangle.

Rather than losing hope, Jay found innovative ways of engaging her daughter. She suggested to the school to simplify and break down topics and to test Sharanya objectively. If the entire subject matter was just dumped on her, Sharanya was prone to feeling completely overwhelmed. After grade 10, Sharanya's school introduced her to Early Childhood Care Education (ECCEd), tailor made for people with learning disabilities.

She completed this two-year program and subsequently worked for five years as a teacher's assistant in preschools, devising activities for children with the help of a teacher. She enjoyed this immensely but was forced to stop during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, Jay & Sharanya attended a 3-day cooking class, conducted by an organisation called SHARAN- Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature. They used all organic, whole, plant-based ingredients to make extremely healthy and delicious food. Coincidentally, Sharanya's doctor had also asked her to get off dairy and gluten to deal with painful menstrual cycles and eczema at the time.

The course became a blessing in disguise, and the two enjoyed the workshops thoroughly. They built on their range of recipes, while simultaneously converting their kitchen to be entirely organic and vegan.

One day, Jay casually sent messages to family and friends that she and Sharanya would one day start Arigato- a vegan kitchen. To her surprise, they received immediate orders!

The organisation, SHARAN, was also extremely supportive of this new initiative, inviting them to put up a stall at their Sunday farmers' market.

Soon Sharanya had her Sundays booked at the stall, with several positive feedback leading them to start a tiffin service.

Their compassion for animals drove their vegan choices, and they learned and grew together despite challenges like the high cost of organic ingredients. Sharanya and Jay's family were extremely supportive of the idea too. Arigato now employs two cooks and a dessert chef who help them cater to all the orders. Sharanya loves assisting all of them and also connecting with customers at different events.

Recently, Arigato tied up with a store to display four of their desserts and Sharanya took the owner's permission to be there for an hour and a half to talk to customers. This garnered a lot of praise from customers who personally called Jay to appreciate her daughter's efforts.

Sharanya and Jay are excited about living their dream and starting a dessert cafe in Mumbai soon. Arigato desserts have already travelled the world, where customers ensure they buy them and take them back home, or abroad to friends and family. Their message to all is simple: "If we can do it, anybody can."

They believe that compassion is not just a choice, but needs to be woven into the tapestry of daily life. Jay, initially protective of Sharanya, never imagined they would start something empowering Sharanya to such an extent. As their venture grew, Jay quit her job to help. When asked if she did this to support Sharanya, Jay responds, "No, Sharanya is doing this to support me."

# NEPAL

**RUPA ARYAL**

Partial Paralysis

*AAMA CHHORI ACHAR*

## RUPA ARYAL

Rupa Aryal was born in Myanmar, with healthy legs. Originally from Palpa in Nepal, Rupa's grandparents settled in Myanmar during the second world war. At the age of two, she suddenly contracted a high fever. Her parents frantically rushed her to the nearest hospital where a doctor gave her an injection in her upper body without even conducting a checkup.

As a result, her body began to slowly weaken, and she even found crawling difficult, always requiring some support. Desperate to help her get better, her parents put their faith in a lot of superstitions, including placing her body, neck-below, in mud, as prescribed by a local ascetic. After several attempts, Rupa's health finally improved with proper treatment to prevent further damage to her limbs. With time and regular visits, she was able to start sitting and attend to her personal needs without another person's assistance. Her right leg continued to be extremely weak, while her left leg was partially so. But Rupa was finally able to stand on her own two feet, with the support of a wall or crutches.

Now, when she sees any sick child, her first response is to help the parents find proper healthcare, something she didn't receive at the right time in her own childhood. Rupa was enrolled in a supportive school in Nepal where she had a happier childhood. Once, a classmate teased Rupa at school and called her a derogatory word in class II and the principal of the school took the matter seriously and made the student apologise. But Rupa was unaware of what the word even meant, she never thought it was a bad thing to be disabled.

This helped her stay happy and she always interacted with people, making several friends. Though there are still days where she feels discontent, she admits that's a part of life- disabled or otherwise. Rupa longed to be independent after her schooling but faced several obstacles, especially from her overprotective family.

Her first job was going to be that of a tuition teacher for primary school children- but when the children's prejudiced parents asked her not to come, Rupa was disappointed that despite having an education, she had no scope of work whatsoever. She went through several attempts at searching and never lost hope. Eventually Rupa found jobs in different NGOs and organisations and was also elected as general secretary of an organisation where she first arranged for 15 street children to receive tuition.

After a two-year job hiatus, she decided to spend her time earning a master's degree, which had to be from home due to the lack of accessibility on campus. When the organisation she worked in was unable to pay salaries during the pandemic, Rupa quit.

She couldn't tolerate being home, keen to start something that was entirely her own but completely lacking in support or financial resources.

Her family surely wouldn't invest in her either, so she approached an organisation that was willing to invest 23,000 Nepali Rupees in her business idea. It was this and pure conviction that led her path from there.

Using her mother's help, she created a batch of *Badam ka achar* (peanut pickle) with fresh peanuts from the market. She left the batch at a friend's *thela* (cart) to be sold and sampled. When the batch was completely sold out, she was able to convince her mother of the idea's viability.

She reinvested her earnings into the business, secured a stall and learned business management through experience.

Rupa had some initial challenges interacting with customers and handling complaints, but she picked up the skill over time.

The biggest difficulty she continues to face is when she has to travel on her 4-wheeler scooter to deliver orders and has to witness customer's reactions to her disability in person- some judge, others show sympathy

while many don't even order from her again.Such is the doubt women with disability face and must have the determination to overcome", expresses Rupa.

Rupa's product range expanded from one to seven in a short span of time, with her pickles reaching international markets as well. Initially questioned by many, she now enjoys support and pride from family and friends, who are keen to invest in her business.

Rupa reflects that it was only her success that convinced those around her- had she failed, things would be very different. Such is the doubt women with disability face and must have the determination to overcome, expresses Rupa.

Her biggest achievement is transforming her overprotective family's attitude into one that backs her dreams. Confident and financially independent, Rupa encourages women with disabilities to motivate themselves despite familial restrictions. She believes in persevering through obstacles to see the brighter future ahead.

## RASHMI AMATYA

Speech and Hearing Impaired

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## Rashmi Amatya

Born in Lalitpur, Nepal, in 1982, Rashmi Amatya is an artist with a hearing disability who has been painting for the last thirty years. Through her art, Rashmi looks to advocate for those who are marginalised, be it socially, politically, educationally, economically, or physically, like herself. At 6 years old, Rashmi was sent to a regular school in her hometown, where she found it tough to understand her friends and teachers, or even follow the subjects being taught. This disappointed her immensely and one day she told her parents that she would not go to school.

After two years of her struggling, the principal of a special school came to Rashmi's house and advised her parents to transfer her there. Finally, in 1991, she was sent to a new school, Central Secondary School for the DEAF, Naxal, Kathmandu and Rashmi finally felt what it was like to have a happy childhood with many friends. She also learned sign language and improved her studies. However, this turned out to be a short-lived period, where in the following year her parents placed her back in a regular school in Kupondole.

They hoped that she would speak one day, yet once more, the communication gap overwhelmed her. One day, returning from school, Rashmi saw an artist making a signboard with a picture and a logo. She was immediately intrigued, and with this newfound curiosity for art, she began drawing pictures every day, gifting them to her friends and teachers. One particular teacher noticed her book full of drawings and encouraged her to go to an art competition at another school.

There was no looking back, and Rashmi consistently found herself being awarded first and second place at every art competition she attended. Art changed her life, how others saw her, and most importantly, how she saw herself. The next twelve years went by in a flash of awards and accolades for her skill.

In 1996, Rashmi also held her first solo art exhibition at the young age of 14, at Sirjina Contemporary Art Gallery, Kathmandu.

But when it was time for her final SLC exams in Class 10, the principal denied her the opportunity, fearing she might affect the school's 100% success rate. She eventually left her studies at 21, only returning to complete her SLC exam in 2011.

Challenges continued as organisations once backing her art withdrew their support, and her parents tried to integrate her into mainstream society again, preventing her from visiting disabled friends.

In 2008, she got the chance to act in a telefilm about her own life and struggles as a deaf girl, titled "Udi Chunu Chandra Ek," Nepali for “if you must aim, aim to reach the moon”. Through the project she started valuing a new art, made new friends, and met her future husband. Once the project ended, everyone went their separate ways, and Rahsmi returned to her family, filled with a sense of loneliness. In 2009, the same year she got married, Rashmi held her second solo exhibition, "The Silence," in Kathmandu, which highlighted the struggles of people with disabilities.

She followed this up with a year in Australia where she exhibited her art in various places. Rashmi also participated in their national-level arts festival "Straight From The Heart". Rahsmi then began visiting organisations working for people with disabilities, learning a lot about their conditions, rights and policies at a national and an international level.

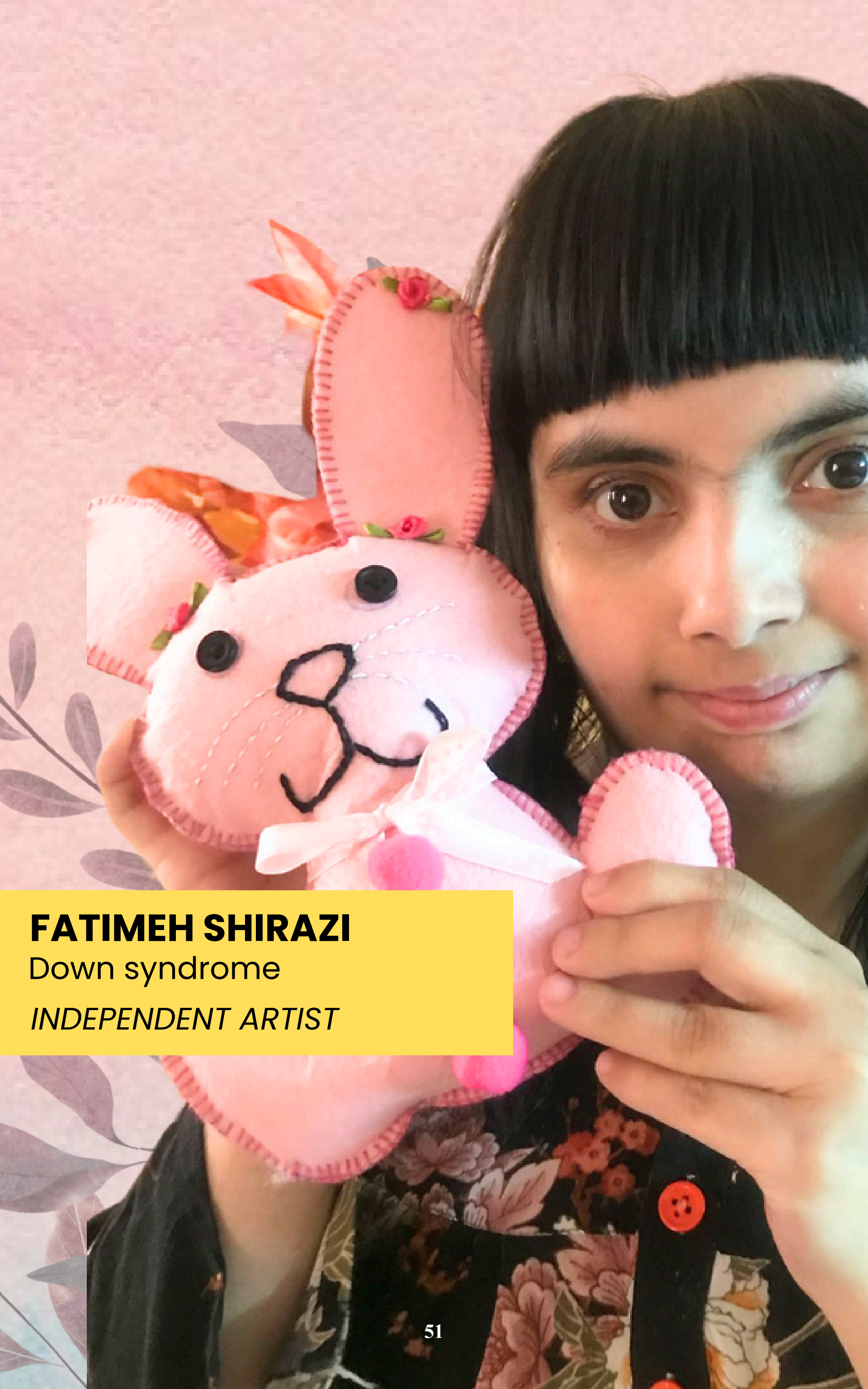
She began to use her work more frequently to depict disabled populations. Currently Rashmi is doing a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree at Kathmandu University. Despite communication issues with teachers and friends Rashmi thrives in getting to learn more and more about the subject she is most passionate about.

For herself and others with hearing impairments like her, she believes it is crucial for parents, friends and teachers to learn basic sign language to show support.

Now Rashmi is associated with several social organisations including Action on Disability Rights and Development (ADRAD) Nepal, Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA), Nepal Federation of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDH), Lamjung Deaf Association (LDA), Women Artist Group Nepal (WAGA), The Himalayan Theatre (THT), and Jyoti Punja Sign Theatre (JST).

She dreams of a future where she can establish a disabled-friendly arts institute in Nepal.

# PAKISTAN



**FATIMEH SHIRAZI**

Down syndrome

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## FATIMEH SHIRAZI

Fatimeh Shirazi, born on February 23, 1993, is the youngest of five children. Diagnosed with Down syndrome at birth, her family faced initial shock, but her mother quickly developed a deep bond with her. Fatimeh defied many expectations, starting to walk at 2 years old and displaying an active nature early on.

Enrolled in a mainstream Montessori school at around 5-6 years old, Fatimeh's youthful appearance made her seem much younger than her peers. At school, she was known for her activity and helpfulness, often organising and cleaning the classroom. However, her attention span was limited, and she preferred spending time outdoors, especially watching cats in the garden. She continued in the Montessori environment until she was 10-11 years old before transitioning to a special school, from 2010 to 2014. Bullying and logistical challenges led her family to withdraw her from the school.

After a year at home, during which she barely had any social activity, Fatimeh's family discovered KDSP, Karachi Down Syndrome Program, the only organisation in Pakistan that exclusively advocates for the acceptance and inclusion of people with Down syndrome. Joining KDSP in 2018 marked a significant turning point in her life. There, Fatimeh flourished in arts and crafts, demonstrating exceptional skills in stitching, painting, and quilling. She creates beautiful keychains, stuffed toys, and intricate quilled products, showcasing her artistic talents.

Her favourite creations include monster keychains and detailed quilling projects, which highlight her meticulous craftsmanship. Fatimeh's dedication to her classes at KDSP is unwavering. Despite a two-month break due to her mother's surgery, she remained eager to return.

KDSP has been instrumental in boosting her self-confidence and fostering her independence. She is now an amazing student, regularly attending classes and continually improving her skills. Fatimeh's products are sold at the KDSP shop, Lehr, providing her with an income and a sense of accomplishment.

Her progress at KDSP has not only enhanced her artistic abilities but also her self-sufficiency. Fatimeh is now more independent and takes pride in her creations.

Though she is 30 years old, Fatimeh looks much younger, often surprising people with her youthful appearance.

She only talks when spoken to, and sometimes engages in self-talking and can be moody. Despite these challenges, Fatimeh's journey is a testament to her resilience and the unwavering support of her family. Her mother hopes she will intern at KDSP before moving on to another organisation, furthering her journey towards independence.

**LAMIA RABBANI**

Down syndrome

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## LAMIA RABBANI

Lamia Rabbani was born via C-section, and her mother faced confusion and concern when Lamia wasn't brought to her immediately. The doctors informed her that Lamia had Down syndrome, bringing a mix of worry and determination.

The family was committed to providing Lamia with all the attention and care she needed. Lamia's early years were filled with health challenges. At one year old, she contracted pneumonia, leading to a prolonged hospital stay. During this time, Lamia showed resilience, starting to walk by holding onto hospital beds. However, a severe reaction to medication caused partial paralysis on her left side, which was a terrifying experience for her family. With diligent care and therapy, Lamia recovered, defying the grim predictions about her future abilities.

When it was time for schooling, Lamia's mother placed her in a daycare to help her adapt to being away from home. After her successful open-heart surgery at 3.5 years old, she was enrolled in a mainstream school.

Despite facing bullying, Lamia persevered before transferring to a special school where she thrived until she was 10. She then attended Bahria Special School until the COVID-19 pandemic. Lamia's life took a transformative turn when she joined KDSP in 2018, where she discovered her passion and talent for arts and crafts. She excelled in painting, paper crafts, clay modelling, and pottery.

Her intricate creations, including beautifully painted canvases and delicate paper crafts, are a testament to her artistic skills and dedication. Lamia's products are sold at the KDSP shop, Lehr, providing her with an income and a sense of accomplishment.

Her involvement in KDSP's skills development classes has not only honed her artistic talents but also fostered her independence. Lamia has become an active participant in her community, treating her family to ice cream and dinners with the money she earns from her crafts.

She is a loving, cooperative individual who adapts well to new environments and is always eager to learn new skills. Lamia's journey symbolises her resilience and the unwavering support of her family. Her story highlights the importance of giving children with special needs the attention and opportunities they deserve. Lamia's achievements, both in her crafts and her personal growth, stand as an inspiring example of what is possible with love, support, and determination.

## RABIA SHAMIM

Down syndrome

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## RABIA SHAMIM

Rabia Shamim's journey is a testament to resilience and the transformative power of support. Born with Down syndrome, her family initially faced shock and uncertainty, but quickly embraced her as a cherished blessing. Despite developmental delays typical of her condition, Rabia's spirited nature shone through early on—by age three, she was not only walking but running with determination.

Growing up alongside her siblings, Rabia engaged in both secular education and religious studies, which contributed to her articulate speech and sensitivity to others' emotions.

However, social interactions outside her family circle posed challenges, despite her active involvement in sports like tennis and special events such as the Special Olympics badminton championships.

It was at the age of 24 that Rabia's life took a new turn when she discovered KDSP. Her enthusiasm for the arts and crafts classes at KDSP became evident as she eagerly immersed herself in various creative projects. Among these, weaving captured her heart and talent the most. Excelling in her craftsmanship, Rabia's skills were celebrated during a memorable field visit to an art school, where she impressed everyone with her expertise on the loom.

At KDSP, Rabia meticulously crafts cushions and coasters, taking pride in her work and the financial independence it brings.

Her earnings from selling these products through KDSP's shop, Lehr, not only bolster her self-esteem but also enable her to contribute meaningfully to her family.

She takes on responsibilities with diligence, from caring for her parents to managing their medications—an expression of her deep love and sense of duty.

Rabia's story exemplifies how nurturing environments and opportunities can empower individuals with Down syndrome to thrive, pursue their passions, and find fulfilment.

Through her journey, she inspires others to recognize and celebrate the abilities and contributions of every person, regardless of their challenges.

**ZAHRA MUHAMMAD**

Down syndrome

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## ZAHRA MUHAMMAD

Zahra's journey is a testament to resilience, determination, and the transformative power of supportive environments. Born in Karachi, it was discovered that she had Down syndrome when she was 11 months old.

Despite this early challenge, Zahra's progress in achieving childhood milestones was remarkable, thanks to dedicated therapies and unwavering family support.

Growing up, Zahra navigated between mainstream and special schools, demonstrating her ability to thrive independently. Inspired by her sisters' academic achievements, Zahra herself embraced the pursuit of education, demonstrating her potential to thrive despite societal expectations.

Her parents, recognizing her determination, wholeheartedly supported her educational journey. Two years ago, Zahra found a pivotal opportunity at KDSP. Enrolling in the Education for Life program, she discovered a passion for painting and paper crafts that quickly blossomed. Her artistic talent shone brightly when her paintings debuted at KDSP's esteemed art exhibition, “Rangon ki Lehr,” where they were one of the first ones to be sold and led to Zahra getting so many subsequent orders.

Beyond her creative pursuits, Zahra embarked on a professional path with an internship at Engro Fertilisers. Assigned to critical data entry tasks in the Commercial department, this experience not only honed her skills but also affirmed her capacity to excel in a professional environment.

Zahra's journey exemplifies the profound impact of support and opportunity in fostering independence and self-confidence. Her resilience and achievements in art and professional development are inspiring, proving that with determination and encouragement, individuals with Down syndrome can overcome challenges and realise their dreams.

Through her artwork and professional endeavours, Zahra continues to break barriers, showcasing the immense potential within every individual, regardless of their circumstances.

**ZIKRA IBRAHIM**

Down syndrome

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## ZIKRA IBRAHIM

Zikra was born in a small town near Hyderabad, Pakistan. When she was 14 days old, she had an extremely high fever which is when the doctor informed her family that she had Down syndrome. Living in a backward area, in a small town near Hyderabad, her family felt isolated, thinking she was the only person in the world with Down syndrome. Without access to proper resources or schools, Zikra's early education was limited to what her sisters could teach her at home.

In 2018, the family moved to Karachi, hoping to find better opportunities for Zikra. However, the schools they found were not suitable, causing her more harm than good. In 2021, a doctor recommended KDSP, and Zikra's journey of transformation began. Initially, she took paper craft classes once a week. After six months, she enrolled in KDSP's Education for Life program, which introduced her to painting, yoga, stitching and many other life-skills.

Zikra's progress at KDSP has been remarkable. Despite her speech being affected by a paralysis attack in her youth, her participation in KDSP's programs has helped her regain her ability to speak. She has blossomed from a shy girl into a confident young woman who understands her rights and abilities. Her teachers at KDSP have been instrumental in building her self-confidence. Among her many talents, painting stands out as Zikra's favourite activity, especially abstract art.

In her stitching class, she initially made stuffed dolphins, which were sold, providing her with a sense of accomplishment and income. She has since expanded her expertise to other products.

Zikra excels in block printing and photography, with block printing being a skill she performs independently and with great pride. Block printing is a skill she wants to pursue in the future as well.

Her block printing products, sold through the KDSP shop, Lehr, bring her immense joy. With the money she earns, Zikra buys her own things and is diligently saving for a special goal: to perform Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage.

She saves her earnings in a money box, reflecting her determination and independence.

Zikra Ibrahim's journey underscores how opportunity and support can be transformative.

At KDSP, she has not only discovered her voice and confidence but also found a path to financial independence and personal fulfilment.

Her story serves as an inspiration, highlighting the potential within every individual, regardless of their circumstances.

# SRI LANKA

**MANGALIKA RANJANI**

Deaf

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## MANGALIKA RANJANI

Mangalika Ranjani was born on December 17, 1961, in Ragama, Sri Lanka. While her parents could hear perfectly, five of their seven children were born with a hearing disability, and Mangalika was one of them. Since her parents could not empathise with the difficulties of such a disability, and knew no one as such around them, it made her upbringing quite difficult and Mangalika never really felt supported by her parents at all. In fact, she didn't even know she had a disability in her childhood and learned of it only in school.

She attended school until the Ordinary level (General Certificate of Education, GCE) but didn't get the chance to take the exam. During her time at school, she learned to make flowers, dresses, and decorations under the guidance of her craft teacher, selling them with the assistance of the convent sisters. This early experience in business gave her a sense of pride and accomplishment. The support from the Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf (SLCFD) and her school were crucial in developing skills that would prove useful later in life.

At 18, after leaving school, Mangalika lived with her aunt and found a stable job. She later married and had a daughter who also had a hearing disability, prompting society to pity her once more. When her husband suddenly left when their daughter was just two, Mangalika became a single mother, responsible for her daughter's education and caring for her own mother, since her father had passed. At this point in her life, she refused to lose hope.

She recalls never being sad, but instead feeling optimistic- she needed to support her child in her studies, and ensure she could become an independent individual. She left her job and started a small business at home when she was 35 years old, stitching different products on her machine.

She enrolled her daughter in the same convent she had attended as a child, so that she would receive the same level of support. After passing her Ordinary level, Mangalika's daughter was able to find a job in a bank.

To support her child who would travel long distances for work, she packed her lunch every day. Soon the bank staff began to ask Mangalika to provide them with cooked meals too.

This became another small business idea through which Mangalika was able to run her household for a while.

The COVID-19 lockdown brought many of her business activities to a halt, but she continued sewing at home. The Deaf Women's Association (DWA) provided her with stall space to display her products during exhibitions, helping her business survive. Although she approached bigger companies to sell her dresses, they preferred sourcing from other companies rather than individuals, limiting her sales to smaller items.

Despite these challenges, Mangalika found that many people came to her home to buy her products, and she was able to communicate effectively with them. Her real challenge, she points out, was in the lack of support from her family.

Now, in 2024, her daughter helps her keep the business running successfully and Mangalika's biggest achievement is to watch her mother communicate with her daughter in ways that she never experienced in her own childhood.

Other than her entrepreneurial ventures, Mangalika also has a knack for leadership that she was able to hone at the SLCFD and the DWA. She was an active member of the federation and was voted in to be the secretary as well.

Her message to the women at the federation and the DWA is about courage: “I had no husband, just my daughter. Despite the tough experiences and loneliness, I found the courage to do it all alone.”

Mangalika believes that people with disabilities should focus on the positives and have self-confidence. If she could do it alone, she believes anyone can.

## NISANSALA SWARNAMALI

Speech and Hearing Impaired

*INDEPENDENT ARTIST*

## NISANSALA SWARNAMALI

Nisansala Swarnamali was born on 9th December 1990, in Ragama, Sri Lanka, to mother Mangalika Ranjani. Since both her parents had a hearing disability like her, she was neither treated differently nor allowed to ever feel incapable. Nisansala recalls always feeling supported by her family and relatives, as they understood sign language.

It was communication with the outside world that was significantly difficult. Yet, her mother was determined to ensure her future was bright. Nisansala attended the same convent school as her mother, completing her Ordinary levels (General Certificate of Education, GCE) there. The supportive environment allowed her interest in creativity and art to flourish. At 13, Nisansala saw a TV program about selling handcrafted art. Inspired, she replicated paper roses and started making birthday cards for friends and teachers. With her mother's support, she bought a craft book and quickly mastered its techniques. Soon, Nisansala was selling her cards to a local store, using the money for her studies.

It was as if she had already started a business at the young age of thirteen. She also showed her artwork to the Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf (SLCFD), which encouraged her to create more items. The federation even helped her present one of her pieces to the President of Sri Lanka, resulting in a generous gift. Everyone in her family was very proud and impressed. Nisansala's passion for learning drives her business. With her neighbours' help, she started creating craft items with ribbons, making paintings and cushions.

She learned a lot from YouTube, including making bags and painting them with fabric colours. She practised crochet, knitting, and cross-stitch, and attended a resin art workshop with her cousin's support.

Nisansala hopes to attend a polymer clay jewellery workshop via Zoom, relying on lip-reading to understand what’s being taught.

She also learned cake-making in a workshop where she was the only person with a hearing disability. Despite difficulties, she persevered, using recorded instructions, asking for help, and relying on interpreters.

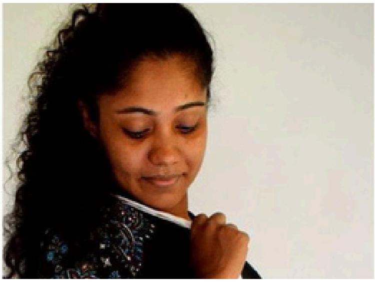
However, she did not receive a certificate, so even when she baked and sold cakes, people started questioning if she, as a person with a disability, even knew what kind of ingredients she was putting into the cakes. From then on, Nisansala only baked for her own family and relatives.

After school, Nisansala worked in a garment factory and then an organisation for those with hearing disabilities. She later worked in a bank for five years, despite initial family reluctance due to the long commute. Proving her independence, she convinced her family she could manage the travel.

In 2019, Nisansala launched her business on Facebook, supported by bank staff. While she supplies products to shops and exhibits at SLCFD, finding the right market and earning sufficient income has been challenging.

Nisansala, through all her work, wishes to constantly keep learning, creating and proving to the world that she can do it.


Her ambition is to prove that a person with a disability can do just as much as someone without one. She wishes to send persons with disabilities a message on action speaking louder than words.

“Only when we show people what we can do, will they believe us. So, we must find the courage in us to go out there and do”. Her mother, Mangalika, looks on with pride at her daughter who she wished to raise to be exactly this fearless.

## NISHA SHAREEF

Paraplegia

*NISHA'S WATCH REPAIR AND SALE*

## NISHA SHAREEF

Born in Kandy in 1970, Nisha Shareef has an inspiring story of grit and determination. She was not disabled from birth but began using a wheelchair due to a spinal cord injury as a toddler. Her family, unable to support her needs, believed people with disabilities didn't need education, just care. Financial struggles made matters worse, and Nisha, out of love for her father, dreamed of supplementing his income. Society always treated her like she couldn't do anything, but rather than getting depressed, she took it as a challenge.

With no education, job prospects were bleak, and with her father's encouragement, she started a paper bag enterprise. But she started to feel she was destined to do more than just that. Since Nisha was always shut in the house, she had no one to confide in and had very few friends in her life. Nisha’s life changed when a neighbour told her about a vocational training centre for people with disabilities. Despite her family's reluctance, she attended the training in Ragama.

The skill of watchmaking caught her eye, and for the first time in life, she received formal training. The supportive environment and additional classes in socialisation and art transformed her. This was Nisha’s first experience of engaging with society and it changed her as a person. Before this, she felt uneasy even making eye contact with people. Discovering her leadership skills, Nisha felt a need to change how society treated people with disabilities. After passing the course ranking second in her batch, Nisha went back home to Kandy in 1994.

She was back home for the first time in nearly three years and felt limited. While waiting for her job placement from the centre, social workers visiting her district suggested that she start her own business. Motivated, she built a shop by herself next to her house in 1994, with a lot of help from her father.

But as life got increasingly difficult, Nisha's mental health suffered. At a point when she was ready to give up, a disability organisation in the area helped her learn about disability rights and advocacy.

Since she only received basic training, she picked up a lot of things by trial and error at the shop and perfected her craft over a period of time. She applied for aid several times, but unsuccessfully. Soon, with her income, Nisha was able to contribute to her family's expenses, especially during any health scare.

She soon became a popular activist in the area. At the same time, Nisha aspired to expand her business and started a shop in the main town of Kandy.

Becoming a public figure helped her garner funds. Travelling by bus daily despite discrimination, she proudly owned the only shop run by a Muslim woman with a disability in the commercial complex with around 150 shops at the bus station. She also had an assistant with dwarfism who supported her for 15 years, helping her balance the home and city shops.

Through her advocacy efforts, Nisha got the opportunity to work with so many organisations in Colombo and also travelled to India, Korea and Malaysia. In 2018, she started her own organisation "WE for I's", since she felt that no one else in Sri Lanka was working for women with disabilities.

During COVID-19, she faced tremendous personal and professional losses, including the loss of both her shops. It was an extremely turbulent year for Nisha, sending her into a deep depression once more. Her business shut down completely for 1.5 years. Her family was left with just one room and she lived in a shed right next to it. She channelled all her energy into advocacy. This was the year she used her phone to the fullest.

Through her large following, she was approached by Enable Lanka Foundation to ensure PWDs in the region did not go hungry during the pandemic. Food packets were distributed and they were able to support 250 families in Colombo and Kandy through this project. Nisha used her contacts with officials to facilitate the process of distribution. Looking back, Nisha feels proud of herself for persevering through all the challenges.

Now, in 2024, Nisha is fully back on track, with her public speaking engagements and her watch business. She has repaired 25,000 watches in her 30 year career. She has built two shops- one for her brother and one rebuilt at the original location at home. Despite the lack of familial support, she remains resilient. She wishes to highlight the difficulties in being a wheelchair user- the lack of mobility, incontinence and skin and health issues. Wheelchair users are also more prone to sexual assault.

But Nisha is keen to tell the world, especially other wheelchair users, to accept and love themselves, even if no one else does. Her story is one of true resilience in the face of many adversities.

**PUBODHA SARANI**
Speech and Hearing Impaired

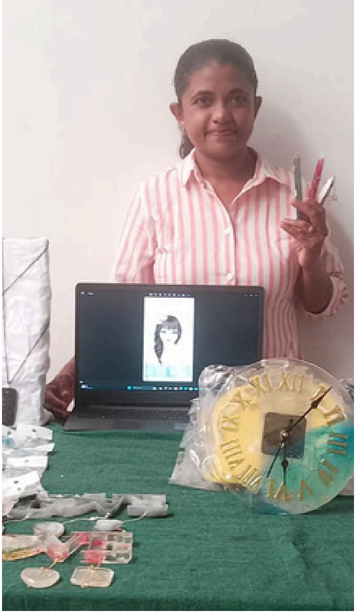
*SARANI’S CREATIONS*

## PUBODHA SARANI

Pubodha Sarani was born on September 2, 1989 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She was the only one in her family with a hearing disability, which posed challenges for her parents who found it difficult to understand her. Pubodha recalls how her mother was quite pessimistic about her future, and it was only her sister who supported her.

While her parents placed her in a school for children with physical and intellectual disabilities, they did not have the capacity to understand how varied her needs were, and how they were not being met. Teachers at the school were not even fluent in sign language. In spite of this, she would travel down south, to and from home on a daily basis and study until the Ordinary Level (General Certificate of Education, GCE). As a young adult, Pubodha was notified by the Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf (SLCFD) of an opportunity for people with hearing disabilities to apply for scholarships to study in Chinese Universities.

She received an acceptance and moved to a new country to be a sign language researcher at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The transition was challenging and she earned a diploma after six years, but decided to pursue a different path due to the demanding nature of research. Pubodha had always nurtured an interest for art and craft. It was during the COVID-19 lockdown, that she explored the possibility of doing something of her own. With no formal training, she tried her hand at creating products, watching Facebook and Instagram videos.



She decided to focus on making slippers, her favourite accessory. The first few pairs she made were immediately bought by her sister’s coworkers, giving her the boost of confidence to officially start her business in June 2023.

Given the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, Pubodha ensured her slippers were affordable by sourcing cheaper materials and producing them on a small scale.

Her products gained popularity, and she expanded to resin keychains, necklaces, and earrings. Pubodha showcased her products at exhibitions hosted by the Deaf Women’s Association (DWA) and the Department of Social Services in Sri Lanka.

She also sold her products online through a Facebook page.
Pubodha’s sons sometimes accompany her to the exhibitions, helping her display her products in a more attractive manner. Their interest in her business brings her a lot of joy. However, being a disabled women entrepreneur comes with its own set of challenges. Pubodha requests all her customers to provide details of size, colour and customisation via text or WhatsApp, and yet most still prefer to call.

This creates a problem for Pubodha who has to rush and ask her sister to answer the call, which isn't a sustainable option. She tries to mitigate this by writing down prices and using photographs to communicate with customers. She hopes to set up a website to ease these communication issues and attract more customers.

Despite her early struggles, Pubodha is proud of her achievements. She uses the money from her business to fund a proper education for her two boys, which she considers her greatest accomplishment.

Today, even those who doubted her, including her mother, proudly showcase her work. Pubodha believes that people with disabilities, especially women, should have self-belief and prove their independence, especially financially.

She encourages people to learn basic sign language to better communicate with those who have hearing and speech disabilities, fostering inclusion and respect.

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