

HOW TO CREATE  
**ONE**  
MILLION JOBS  
*for* **WOMEN**  
**IN RURAL INDIA**

10 VITAL LESSONS  
*of* A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

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Maria van der Heijden





This is a mission, born in 2007,  
coming to life.

This is people's teamwork to make  
the dream work.

This is accepting cultural differences  
and overcoming hurdles.

This is learning from each other and  
failures, and starting all over.

This is having fun with a passionate  
network of professionals.

This is the result of partnerships  
and co-creation.

All with one aim:  
working for IMPACT and change.

# So...



We love freedom.  
We believe in equality.  
We dislike hierarchy.

That's why we went to India.  
To create one million jobs for women.  
Because money sets you free.  
And helps you take care of your family  
and community.


We learned a lot, became humble,  
had lots of fun and became patient  
(ok, sometimes).  
We became a group of craftsmen in  
business-consultancy.  
A boutique consultancy which makes  
companies grow.

Here you can read our stories and  
lessons of yesterday and tomorrow.

Enjoy reading!

*Ellen & Maria*

## INTRODUCTION



As social entrepreneurs we are committed to create social value. This value is embodied in the number of jobs we have created for women in rural India. In the space of ten years Women on Wings, in partnership with social entrepreneurs in India, has created more than 230,000 extra jobs. A job and steady income have enormous IMPACT on the lives of women and their children. Research by the World Bank and the UN has indicated that women use their income to give their children better education and food. In this way, women break the cycle of poverty. Women on Wings is founded on the principle of achieving this type of IMPACT. Our personal experiences, which were defined by having mothers that are from a generation that did not go to university and stopped working as soon as they had children, was something that we wanted to give to women and their daughters in India. We wanted to make an IMPACT through paid work for women in a place where this is not a matter of course: in rural India.

But the IMPACT that Women on Wings had made went much further. In ten years' time, more than 100 professionals have joined the Women on Wings network. These are experienced managers and entrepreneurs from the business community who donate their time on a charitable basis to support social entrepreneurs in India with their knowledge and expertise in organizational development, strategy, innovation, marketing, finance, logistics, purchasing, and so much more.

This booklet covers the IMPACT - planned and unplanned - realized by Women on Wings. It highlights our successes and the mistakes we made, or rather, to put a more positive spin on it, the vital lessons that ten years of social entrepreneurship have taught us. Entrepreneurship is about having a dream, about being persistent and tenacious, but it's also about being able to keep the plates spinning, taking many different decisions, learning from setbacks, and making mistakes.



# THE STORY *of* DURGA



**Durga is a group leader of Sadhna, a women's cooperative of 700 masters in embroidery in Udaipur, Rajasthan. Sadhna is Women on Wings' first business partner in India.**

Durga was betrothed at age six, came to live with her husband and in-laws at age fifteen and one year later got her first child, daughter Anjali. Today, daughter Anjali is studying to become a doctor. Anjali will only consider marriage when she can financially support herself.

Durga works hard and has her own income. Next to her job with Sadhna, she started her own enterprise. She runs a jewelry enterprise and earns a fair income which not only enabled her to send her children to school, but also to build a new house. The new house is a huge step in welfare. Before, Durga and her family lived in a small two room house. The new house has three stories.

Durga has met the Women on Wings founders and some experts on a number of occasions. Says Durga: "Being supported by someone motivates and encourages. I'm very satisfied that the growth of Sadhna has been successful in making women in our villages economically independent. The value of this cannot be estimated by the money we earn, but by the other goals we are able to achieve. Like admitting our daughters to school. That's achievement for us."





# 10

LESSONS

# 1 A DREAM FOR THE FUTURE

We had a conviction, we saw the possibilities, and we wanted to make a change. For us, it was, and continues to be about IMPACT. We want to make a substantial and concrete change in the lives of thousands of women, their families, and the next generation. Life is easier when you have the courage to define your dream and your goal at the very start of your business pursuits. A goal that in some way appears extreme, perhaps even impossible, but which can factually be achieved. It needs to be a dream that you strive for with undaunted passion and dedication. A goal that is so important that it creatively and energetically incenses you and makes you even more resolute if it doesn't happen fast enough.

## OUR OBJECTIVE:

### To create one million jobs for women in rural India

One compelling goal: one million jobs for women in rural India. What would that look like?

Through an exchange program in the autumn of 2006 we were introduced to one particular example that would stick with us and became the blueprint for what we wanted to upscale to 1,000 companies. Using an Excel sheet we calculated N-1 to scale. With 1,000 companies we would be able to create 1 million jobs in the near future. Easy-peasy according to the Excel sheet.

## LESSON 1:

Define  
a **BOLD**  
target...

a bit  
unease

## HOW TO DEFINE A SINGLE COURSE

One million jobs for women in rural India. Every word in this sentence is laden and defines the direction that we are taking - nothing can redirect us from this path. Women, India, work, rural, and one million. None of these words are empty - they all have a multitude of meanings representing an immense task.

But how do you define a single course that will help you reach that ultimate goal? Ideas were plenty, but we decided to bring in a coach to create some order in the chaos in our heads and to direct us to the turning point. During the coaching talk we walked to a nearby park with a water pond while trying to clearly define who we were and what we wanted. That's when the light bulb suddenly lit up. We visualized the women in rural India doing their washing at the waterside and understood in that instant that the essence of Women of Wings was these women. Women who are essential to economic development and that can set a pivotal example for the next generation.‰

# 2

LESSON 2:

**Strive for the  
purpose from both  
the head  
& heart**



## STAY THE COURSE

Holding on to the dream is what truly takes courage. Approximately 300 million women in rural India need work, so the market is more than big enough. But obtaining financing was especially difficult. We received regular invitations to start working in countries in Africa, in Indonesia, and in refugee camps with solid financial backing, each of which presented interesting challenges in relevant areas. However, we declined all these invitations. We chose to focus on India, to gain a better understanding of the culture, and to build up our track record. In 2007 we started sharing business knowledge at one Indian social enterprise. Not soon after, the second and third followed. We are now working with 35 partners. We continue to learn and evaluate what works and what doesn't and remain flexible. We don't believe in setting out a finely detailed plan - instead we start with a basic plan and test it along the way. But we do believe in working together towards one single goal, building networks, and creating trust. Money is a necessity and always a temptation, but standing for what you believe in will last you a lifetime.

LESSON 3:

# Hold on to the dream

# 3

## ENJOY THE DIFFERENCES

While we did know a little about India, we had to be realistic: if you're not born and raised there, it is nearly impossible to truly understand this beautifully complex country. India is a microcosm of the world and each trip taught us something new. We read a lot of non-fiction and Indian fiction which turned out to be vibrant and captivating. We also talked about the differences and similarities with entrepreneurs, the rickshaw drivers, the owner of the guesthouse, and our colleagues in India to try and get to grips with this country. It took us a few trips to realize that in India accepting what is possible on the day and going along with it takes a completely different mind-set than fixed scheduling.

Eventually we were accepted in the community because we kept coming back. We didn't just come there with empty words and promises, we arrived ready to work together with Indian social entrepreneurs and continued to build relationships and to listen to what people had to say. We didn't approach anything from our own perspective or pretend that we knew it better. You can't build relationships in India in a few visits. This is a process that takes years, but once that relationship has been established it will last a lifetime.

### LESSON 4:

# Learn and *be* inquisitive



We haven't quite yet discovered the usefulness of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). An entire ceremony is organized with much enthusiasm: flowers are presented, hands are shaken, photos are taken, and signatures placed. We signed quite a few to mark the start of several great partnerships...

But to be honest, the parties with which we got started without signing any MOU, have made a much larger IMPACT.

## AMBITION AND DRIVE

If there's no clear goal, people will just keep talking. So we want to create a million jobs? That's a great idea, but what happens next? Our model was to provide business knowledge and craftsmanship in consultancy for social entrepreneurs in India who create jobs for women in rural India. But it was just the two of us and we had almost no financial resources. But what we did have was a whole lot of ambition and drive.

The most important lesson that we learned and want to pass on is 'dare to ask'. Clearly state what you need and reach out. That's what we did and friends, former colleagues, and people from our network asked how they could help us. As we needed a great deal of experience and knowledge, we used these offers of help and put them to good use. So, the lesson here is that if your goal is clear, people will gladly offer their help. The goal itself should not be up for discussion, there should only be talks about how that goal is going to be achieved. After all, that is what we want to see happen, one way or the other.

LESSON 5:

# Dare to ask

Dear Santa,

I've been a good  
boy. And this year I want  
like a new tricycle, a dollhouse  
and a dollhouse for it to  
live in.

I would also love a Shing  
cassette  
my sing

Just like children make their list for Santa, make sure that you ask for what you want, or you might receive something you don't need.



## SET HIGH STANDARDS AND VALUES

Women on Wings is a social enterprise with limited resources supported by experienced business professionals who donate their valuable time and skills. But we set specific standards from the very beginning. After all, volunteering is not without obligation and we were selective about with whom we worked. We formulated the exact required profile for each role or challenge and made no concessions. Quality is also something you choose. We aim to make an IMPACT, and sometimes someone simply just does not fit the culture or philosophy of our organization to make this IMPACT a reality.

We build an organization with the support of these volunteering professionals, men and women with at least fifteen years of experience who work together with Indian social entrepreneurs. These professionals are not employed by the organization, but form an essential link in the Women on Wings model. They are our human capital. Using intrinsic motivation as the basis, we test them against our values which all our partners are expected to uphold: energetic, living up to expectations and equality. We can now safely say that these values have become our trademark and form the foundation of our IMPACT.

### LESSON 6:



**Live  
your  
values,  
quality  
is a  
choice**



In our first year we were able to give form to our organization with the many good ideas that everyone came up with.

But an idea is worth nothing if it is not executed.

Brainstorming and talking will only get you so far; what's more important is that someone takes the reins and takes **ACTION**.

## LEAD, NOT MANAGE

From the very start we made two important statements. Firstly, we wanted a compact organization in the Netherlands with a possibly larger team in India. And secondly, we weren't going to play 'office'. We didn't want to be preoccupied with creating the perfect office or with decorations and furniture and definitely didn't want to waste the money on that. These were not the things that were going to help us reach our goal.

We preferred to be practical and ran a virtual office for the first few years. As the organization grew, we only needed an office space for two days a week. The rest of the time we would work from wherever we were. Our team consists of senior professionals who had absolutely no problem adapting to this. It was the ideal way of working that focused on getting results instead of being bogged down by traditional office interactions.

### LESSON 7:

# Don't spend money on assets



No unnecessary luxury also means staying in clean, but modest guesthouses and certainly no five-star hotels. We found a great place in Delhi. I was nearly asleep when I thought I felt something crawl over my hand. I first thought I might have dreamt it, but then something definitely moved. We were sharing a room and we both felt a little uneasy about what was moving. So we went to the lady that ran the guesthouse who calmly replied, 'Oh yes, I noticed a rat this week... There it is in the bathroom.'

Armed with a slipper, she closed the door behind her, and launched herself at the rat. After a great deal of commotion we could only imagine the situation in the bathroom. But then she appeared, smiling: problem solved. But a serious clean-up was needed after that. And that's just how it goes.

## TAILOR MADE, NO MODELS

The business knowledge provided by Women on Wings is demand-driven; the entrepreneur in India knows what he/she needs. We are often asked which model we use. This is not surprising; consult any management textbook and you'll find a countless number of models. And our reply: we use all of them. Why? Because craftsmanship in consultancy means customization; taking into consideration the needs and adjusting accordingly. We don't have one standard model into which we try to fit the demand. You have to visualize what you want; an A4 piece of paper might be all the space you need. Being brief and to the point forces you to be more direct and to define the core of your needs. All our professionals are experts in their field and use their discretion and knowledge to select the best model for each entrepreneur.





Working efficiently is our mantra. We had successfully entered into partnerships with three international organizations. We had big names, ambitious plans, and everyone was impressed. But then, two years later, our eyes were opened when we realized that a steering group meeting in Delhi for fifteen people organized in a gorgeous conference room with cappuccinos and air con, centred around two people in the state of Uttar Pradesh. This had nothing to do with IMPACT.

We immediately put a stop to this. This wasn't the most efficient way of achieving our goal and was taking up too much time and energy. We had almost started managing money instead of the mission and that was certainly not the plan.

## DUAL LEADERSHIP

Although we have two founders, deciding on who was the boss was easy: both! Each equal to the other. And it worked, but required openness, compromise, and daring to reveal your vulnerability. But it also asks for speaking up about the things that you're unsure or unhappy about. In this equation  $1 + 1$  really equals 3. Of course, there is some friction, as we're both quite stubborn, each from our own unique perspective. But a simple walk through the forest proved to be the perfect solution for these moments. After 1.5 hours we solved any discord, as long as we were honest to ourselves and to each other. We also reminded ourselves that it's about the mission, about creating jobs for women in rural India. That reminder helped us settle our differences fairly quickly. This sense of equality has also been applied to the salaries of the team in the Netherlands. Everyone is paid the same salary, based on the number of days worked, of course. That avoids any debates.



LESSON 9:

# The goal dwarfs the ego

## THE FOUNDER'S DILEMMAS

You need to assess who is best suited to which phase in an organization. Once the pioneering phase was done, the work mainly shifted to India and that's where growth has to take place. The next phase was focused on stabilizing the organization in India, so the time came to start thinking about the next step. The logical conclusion was to phase out the founders. Together with the Indian and Dutch teams we formulated a three-year plan for the transition. While this went without a hiccuph technically, one important lesson we took away from this is that you should hire a coach to help you, as a founder, remove yourself from the daily operations. We had sessions with the team, individually and together, to ensure that this process went smoothly for everyone involved and learnt that letting go really means 'letting go' and not being a backseat driver. Even amongst ourselves this process of letting go was a varying experience. For one, the process might be easier or faster than for the other, and this was a strange emotional experience. This type of transition can quickly start taking up too much internal time and energy and may cause you to shift the focus away from the mission. Coaching turned out to be really important in making this transition efficient and successful.



### LESSON 10:

# Find the right moment to pass the baton





## THE FUTURE OF THE NEXT GENERATION

The work of Women on Wings impacts the present with a focus on the future. When a woman gets a job and a steady income it not only puts two meals on the table every day, or gives her a new, more equal position in the family or community, or enables her to participate in decisions about how the household finances are spent and thus improve her self-esteem.

It also impacts the next generation. Of the many women that we have met in India, the story is always the same: their priority is a good education for their children and especially their daughters. The women for whom we work have often not been to school or were married at a young age. Having a job has an enormous **IMPACT** on them and on their families.



## **INCOME FOR WOMEN DIRECTLY BENEFITS FAMILY**

Empowering women is a well-proven strategy for improving children's well-being. In fact, rural women's economic empowerment can help reduce the number of underweight children. Putting more income in the hands of women, translates into improved child nutrition, health and education.

## **SCHOOLING IS IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY FOR GIRLS**

An extra year of primary school increases girls' eventual wages by 10-20 percent and encourages girls to resist child marriage. One extra year of primary school makes girls less likely to experience violence. They will also have fewer children.

# THE STORY *of* SAROJ

Saroj from Uttar Pradesh, was married off at the age of fifteen. As a child she went to school and she was very happy. However, her poor farmer father couldn't afford to send Saroj to school beyond 8th grade.

Married life changed everything. Life in her husband's house restricted her freedom and opportunities even more. Her prospects for a better future began changing when a women empowerment program funded by the IKEA Foundation came to her village and offered twelve women the chance to learn embroidery and stitching.

Saroj strongly believed that this would bring huge change. She ignored her husband and took the opportunity. Her perseverance payed off; after gaining the right skills in the program, she joined 'Women on Wings' business partner Rangсутra Crafts, which has a long-term partnership with IKEA. Saroj is now creating handmade limited-edition collections of home accessories sold in selected IKEA stores (e.g. in the Netherlands).

With the money she earns, Saroj is able to fulfil a dream she has had for her children. Says Saroj: "All of my children go to school. My dream is that they go far in life. That they study and become what they want to. A mother would only want her children to be happy and live well."



# THE IMPACT *of* A DREAM



A lot has changed in just one generation. A job and an income give women the opportunity to give their children an education. Working is empowering and builds self-confidence. It gives women a voice in the village, a say over their children's education and the ability to become a role model for their daughters. That is the IMPACT we had visualized when we established Women on Wings ten years ago. It's been an amazing journey. Thank you for being part of our journey.

If you want to join us in continuing our adventure, let us know:

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# THE IMPACT *of* A DREAM



To have a noble dream is one thing. To really start and work 10 years on realizing that dream is another.

Having had all the opportunities themselves for education and corporate careers, and having traveled in India quite a serious bit, Ellen Tacoma and Maria van der Heijden were convinced that by sharing knowledge they could IMPACT the lives of rural families in India.

After 10 years, Ellen and Maria look back at their journey and share their 10 most vital lessons of starting and running Women on Wings. All of that leading to the creation of 230,000 jobs for women in rural India. That means for 230,000 families an escape from the cycle of poverty - directly impacting over one million people in rural India. The journey continues!