

India's diagnostics queen

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Despite the hard struggles in a male-dominated society, women have fought bravely and stood their grounds against all odds. Ms Ameera Shah, the MD and promoter of Mumbai-based Metropolis Healthcare, isn't an exception either.

Though she took over her father's business, the journey wasn't a cake walk. She was often mistaken for a secretary, and had to overcome gender discrimination and belittling from junior male colleagues.

In her exclusive interview to BioSpectrum, she shares her insights on Indian diagnostics scene, the company's next market expansion plans, and ultimately her own entrepreneurial struggles and immeasurable efforts in building her own diagnostics kingdom. Excerpts:

Q: What trends are shaping up the Indian diagnostics space?

Ameera Shah: The most important trend today that we observe is the heightened awareness of the new age customer. They take their health in their own hands, take preventive measures and want to lead a healthy lifestyle.

For today's customer, health is about wellness rather than the absence of illness which is an extremely wonderful trend.

On the technical side, there was a time when doctors from India sent blood samples abroad for hormone and thyroid testing.

Scope of diagnosis was extremely limited in India.

My father, Dr Sushil Shah, saw an opportunity and brought many new tests and technologies to India for the first time.

Q: Tell us about your major growth drivers in India and other countries.

AS: Cutting-edge technology, innovative work equipments, expansive logistics network and rigorous processes are the keys to Metropolis' growth in the country.

These allow us to deliver precision and accuracy in every single test. Additionally, Metropolis has expanded into new service lines such as clinical trials, hospital lab management, home health services, preventive health check-ups, and corporate and wellness solutions.

Q: What are the challenges in building a diagnostics business in India?

AS: There are multiple challenges when you start expanding. In India, the dynamics of each city is different. What works in Surat may not work for Patna or Cochin.

While entering each new market whether through a green field or an acquisition, it is important to study the market in depth and cut strategies accordingly.

In India, each state and each city is penetrated like a new market. Some of the broad challenges in India can be summarized as lack of trained talent, cost of infrastructure, cost and volume dilemma and pricing challenge.

Q: What factors do you consider while entering a new market?

AS: Entering new markets, as it may seem, is not really easy. In case of a diagnostic business, we have to look after the following parameters including local competition, brand recognition and recall, economic markets, political and policy scenario, and legal jurisdictions.

Q: Which markets would you be expanding to in the next couple of years?

AS: We want to extensively expand in the North Indian region and Africa specifically.

Moreover, we are delving deeper into the geographic regions in all countries where we are already present. We see potential in our growth in the African continent where we are gradually expanding since the last five years.

Q: Which areas in diagnostics are still untapped or needs more attention?

AS: While corporate players have ensured standardization of processes, it is important that government takes measures to bring in regulation to the diagnostic sector.

A change in the regulatory scenario can transform the landscape of the industry. Accreditation need to be made mandatory so as to ensure labs maintain basic protocol.

This will ensure more accurate reports, right diagnosis and disease management and in-turn better healthcare costs for the masses.

Q: Any M&As on the cards?

AS: Our current plans are to expand geographically within regions we are already present in.

We will make any announcements for mergers or acquisitions whenever they are in the pipeline.

Q: Are there any advantages in being a woman in this industry?

AS: There are no advantages in this industry for women. From my personal experience, I would like to highlight that the diagnostic industry isn't the easiest to enter especially for a woman.

There are a lot of preconceived notions attached to women. My first challenge was to change Metropolis from a sole proprietorship to a company.

Being a woman entrepreneur, I had to face multiple instances of gender discrimination, which meant from being mistaken for

a secretary to constantly being undermined by my junior male colleagues.

This industry is dominated largely by men and for me to make a mark I have struggled my way through. Many may think it's a family business and would have been easy for me, which is definitely not the case. I have taken a lot of time and put in immeasurable effort to bring Metropolis to these heights.

Q: Message to all the Indian [women entrepreneurs](#)?

AS: In India, from the very beginning women are taught that their greatest asset is gold or jewelry. I strongly believe that for any woman, not just a woman entrepreneur, her greatest asset is her confidence - confidence to make her choices; be it personal or professional life.

I will urge all women to embrace their right to confidence. While the society might take time to transform completely, women can start introducing gradual changes in their lives. This will lead up to the process of self discovery.

The gender battles that women generally face in the workplace and the ones that a women entrepreneur will face are different.

For a woman businessperson, because you are in charge of building the organization and the culture, the situation is unquestionably different. But for a woman entrepreneur, you have to go out and sell your story because you are building your own brand.

Q: How do you manage work-life balance?

AS: While it's not easy to take time out of the daily grind, I try to remove some time for myself every week.

I regularly play tennis and work out at least thrice a week. I love the outdoors and so try to get in some sailing, camping and trekking whenever possible.

Any down time I get is divided between activities that boost my physical and mental health, and spending with my loved one.

Q: What next for Metropolis?

AS: Metropolis is amongst the top 1 percent labs in the world in terms of quality and accuracy of reports. We want to gain more market share in North India and hence going more aggressive in the north.

We have been in an expenditure phase for the past two to three years where we have been investing in our people, infrastructure, distribution, network and sales. Now I am hopeful about experiencing the results of the work we've been doing.

Q: When do you think Metropolis will be ready for its IPO debut?

AS: It might be ready in the long run, however, not right now.