

DaringCircles

by the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society

#Women4Business

Leading through adversity: Women entrepreneurs and Covid-19

A series of interviews by the Women4Business Daring Circle

Interview with Ayesha Khanna

CEO and Co-Founder, ADDO AI

May 2020

 **WOMEN'S FORUM**
FOR THE ECONOMY & SOCIETY



#Women4Business Interviews

How are women being impacted by COVID-19, and how are they leading to address the challenges faced by others? To learn, The Women's Forum for the Economy and Society is conducting a series of interviews with women entrepreneurs and ambassadors for women's empowerment around the world.

These interviews are unveiling unique insights into the far-reaching impacts of Covid-19, and the diverse ways these inspiring women are responding to the crisis with leadership and innovation.

Beyond recovery: designing an inclusive world

In the face of the new reality instilled by this pandemic, we are bound together more than ever. Let's dial up our solidarity as we design an inclusive recovery: for the women who continue to be disproportionately affected, and for everyone else who needs their leadership and positive impact. This crisis has reminded us of how critical our work is: of the urgent need to reshape the world together, driven by our **common purpose** to accelerate inclusive progress.

We care. We share. We dare.

Dr. Ayesha Khanna, Co-Founder & CEO, ADDO AI

The Women's Forum met with Dr. Ayesha Khanna, Co-Founder and CEO of [ADDO AI](#), an artificial intelligence (AI) solutions firm and incubator. She has been a strategic advisor on artificial intelligence, smart cities and fintech to leading corporations and governments. Ayesha serves on the Board of [Infocomm Media Development Authority](#) (IMDA), the Singapore government's agency that develops and regulates its world-class technology sector to drive the country's digital economy and power its Smart Nation vision. Ayesha is also a member of the [World Economic Forum's](#) Global Future Councils, a community of international experts who provide thought leadership on the impact and governance of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence.

Ayesha, can you tell us about your main inspiration and motivation for founding ADDO AI?

The big thing I realised when I moved to Singapore was that even though I'd been doing technology and data science throughout my career, there was still a huge gap in the Asian market. Companies were struggling with the demand from consumers, struggling to understand how to optimise supply chains, staff productivity and to reach as many consumers as possible with personalised offers. This motivated me in particular to think about the emerging middle class and its growing needs. About how we could use data science and AI to help companies reach this group in a more democratic, customer-centred way, allowing consumers to access services faster, better and at a lower cost. This democratisation had always been important to me and for many years whilst at university, I volunteered with human rights groups, I worked in microfinance, for women in villages, I advocated for women in jails, I worked in inner-cities in Pakistan and for children and their right to education. As a result, I have a very strongly human-centred approach towards AI and extremely strong empathy for humans in the age of AI, which is in fact, the subject of my next book.

As a woman in the typically male-dominated tech industry, have any of your ambitions or work in the field been influenced by this?

In technology, traditionally, there are fewer women than men, its nowhere close to 50% and there is a real lack of representation. As a result, there are not enough role models to encourage younger women to enter the field. There is also a bias that women aren't as good as men at computer science or engineering which is completely ridiculous and a perception that needs to be shattered and buried forever. But actually, this is now changing. The reason for this is that there are more organisations forming, including my own, advocating for women in this space. Lots of groups are getting together and talking about how best to support each other, alongside governments who are making a more systematic effort to support women in tech. In Singapore there is the Singapore Women in Technology group and there are numerous charities emerging encouraging girls to go into this field, and believe that they can thrive. It also encourages girls to see that in fact, the opportunity has never been greater, especially in Asia, since this where the majority of the world will be most impacted by AI and data, because of the huge numbers of people that live there.

How is the tech community in general, and your business in particular, being impacted by COVID-19?

On the one hand, since I'm in the tech industry, we are used to working with global clients, digitally. If anything, the world is now realising that to be more agile, responsive and adaptive you need to have a digitisation strategy and a digital infrastructure. In fact, my PHD is on information infrastructures for Smart Cities. I've been encouraging cities, governments and companies to do this for a long time. That said, while my business hasn't been as affected as say, the hospitality or tourism industries, we do have some clients in these sectors and that proportion of our business has definitely been impacted. In health care and education, we really need to move faster. In Asia in particular, there is such a hunger and thirst for better quality of life and better education for social mobility, and I think this will be a big boost to that. Whilst it's an absolute tragedy that so many people have passed away, and I hope we can stem that, as we do become more adaptive in Tele-health and Tele-education, we will hopefully develop more awareness and fewer casualties the next time we are faced with a pandemic. Which, if we listen to Bill Gates, it seems likely we will.

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In what ways can AI be applied to support businesses, communities and individuals most impacted by Covid-19? Is your company providing any critical services or support?

I have been in touch with several governments about exactly this - about how to use AI to derive better health care insights and better manage emergency response systems. Right now, there is really no clear idea about who is getting sick and where. For example, if I needed to know in a large country what areas would be most vulnerable, if I knew that a patient had tested positive for Covid-19, what is the modelling I could do to see how another area would be affected? There are many factors that impact this including looking at the number of roads, density of population, literacy levels, pedestrian traffic, number of hospitals etc – there are just so many different sources of data that can inform healthcare and emergency response operations. AI can help us respond faster and better to any risk, which is why I believe that we need Smart City control rooms. Right now, we mainly talk about this in relation to transport and not yet enough in relation to emergency response and health. And for this, more than anything, we need data and data platforms. You can't make these decisions, understand these insights, or do any of the modelling, unless you have a data infrastructure, and that is exactly what my company builds.

**Do you feel there is a gender lens in the AI response?
Or does it seek to support society more generally?**

I think people are thinking about gender, especially since women are a more vulnerable group within society. They are victims of domestic violence but children too are more at risk of paedophilia in the home, the elderly are more at risk because of their age and men are also more vulnerable to other things. Whenever there is a crisis there tends to be a blanket response, but since there is such variation amongst the demographic, there really should be emphasis and recognition of that difference. This should not be at the expense of the main priorities - right now we are in an emergency state and we can't necessarily take all those nuances into account, but, for example, at the moment, there are cancer patients who are not getting their treatment on time. If we had better data and more connected systems, more Tele-health and better education, we could reach out to these people and reassure them, and ensure that next time we will be better prepared to organise our crisis response in a more tailored and granular manner. In general, there continues to be support for women in AI to lend their voices to the conversation and the decisions being made.

Including women's perspectives means there is less bias and more diversity in the discussion and its results. That continues to be important; in war, in peace and in pandemics!

Data privacy laws in Europe mean we don't have access to sex disaggregated data so it's challenging to know how women are disproportionately affected. What kind of regulations do we need?

I am actually a big fan of GDPR as philosophically I believe in what it stands for, which is data privacy as a human right. I do think there are data governance principles under which you can access certain types of data and there must be the right type of legislation and regulation around that. Data is extremely important and we should not hurry into anything. Whilst in crisis situations citizens might allow certain decisions to be made to save their lives, as according to Maslow's hierarchy, survival is the most important need of all human beings. But in general, we should be careful how we use data - some may think GDPR is extreme but the spirit of it is correct and I have always been supportive of treating data privacy as a human right.

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What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities arising from this crisis, for the tech sector and for women entrepreneurs?

The largest challenge is that small businesses will suffer. For businesses to survive they need support and although governments are trying to offer this (certainly in Singapore) many of these small businesses are women-led and this situation will continue to be very difficult. Unlike tech companies who are used to working digitally and are more agile, many other companies are finding their work disrupted. It is very hard for them to just immediately start accepting online orders and deliveries online for example, as they don't have the infrastructure in place. In terms of opportunities, I think the shock will force all businesses to digitise and to start moving beyond consumerism, instead focusing on better value for society.

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I also think we will perhaps become more interested in human connections. That is the interesting paradox, since we always worry that the more technical we become the more introverted and isolated we become, but now we are seeing that perhaps we're not capable of that. We are very social creatures and I think it will force us technologists to rethink and place more value on human connection, even as we continue to digitise, so our resilience as a species is better and our health outcomes more positive. We don't have to sacrifice the things that make us more human and connected to each other! During this crisis I certainly value my family and friends a great deal more, I crave their presence and I'm using digital to connect with them. Millennials and Gen Z are already inclined towards this and are showing us the way. Role models like Greta Thunberg and Malala are inspiring not only young women like my daughter, but also inspiring me. This is wonderful, and I hope that they will gain more respect, that there will be no ageism and that we will listen to them all - Greta, Malala and Jane Goodall together on one platform. It doesn't matter whether they are 80 or 15 - we should respect them and enjoy what they say, to live a more sustainable and humane life.

If you have a key message to share with other women entrepreneurs and business leaders at this time, what is it?

It has never been more important to understand the basics of technology and women must not be afraid to take their businesses digital, whatever their industry. They should reach out to other entrepreneurs for advice and study on their own, even if that's just through Youtube and edX videos. This is one competitive advantage that is not going to go away. Women need to be confident in their creativity and ambition and it is very difficult, for any man or woman, to be confident in their future if they don't understand the basics. They must accept that this change is happening and be prepared to use it responsibly. Women must invest in their education and upskilling, to understand how technology will affect their chosen careers and passions in life.



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The Women4Business Daring Circle is a global coalition of partners, with an ambition to promote and accelerate women's economic empowerment in business and supply chains.

The Daring Circle is led by P&G, in collaboration with Accenture, BNP Paribas, Bouygues, Exxon Mobil, Johnson & Johnson, L'Oréal and Publicis Groupe. The Circle is supported by Knowledge Partner AT Kearney, Insight Partner Clifford Chance, and Institutional Partners WEConnect International and UN Women. Expert Partners include BY.O Group, founder of Catalyst at Large Suzanne Biegel, HEC, senior expert in gender Meg Jones, and founder of the Global Business Coalition for Women's Economic Empowerment Linda Scott.