



Mira Nair OR WW4a CAPTION: Madhur Jaffrey

BY RONITA TORCATO

Film-maker Mira Nair, celebrity chef and TV host, model and celebrity foodie Padma Lakshmi, and actress and cookery expert Madhur Jaffrey joined a battery of women professionals at the South Asian Women's Leadership Forum, (SAWLF) Third Congress, on March 15, 2008 at the global headquarters of PricewaterhouseCoopers in New York. They were part of a day-long conference in which

SAWLF presented 26 private and public sector women leaders who shared their stories of challenge and achievement.

Through the annual event, SAWLF is committed to providing women entrepreneurs and professionals from all over the world to discuss the opportunities and challenges they face as they pursue their lives and careers according to the organisation's agenda posted on their website.

"As a mother and professional, I realize the value in supporting a

# Celebrating women

The South Asian Women's Leadership Forum's signature event went off with a bang

platform for the next generation of women leaders. SAWLF is a valued resource for women within the South Asian community," said Sheila Hooda, Senior Managing Director and Head of Strategy and Business Development, TIAA-CREF.

Set up in 2003, SAWLF is the first American, non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of South Asian women professionals in the marketplace. With its headquarters in New York City and chapters in Chicago and Washington DC, SAWLF serves as a primary business and networking platform for South Asian women.

"Initially, we had a series of informal events and the response was strong, today our membership base exceeds 4,000 women from across the US, UK and South Asia," says Simi Ahuja, SAWLF founder. "Our organization was created to capitalize on the experience of women in senior leadership roles and extend their knowledge to the growing number of South Asian women who have entered the US marketplace in recent years."

Attracting women of different ages from diverse backgrounds, the forum has benefited from many expert advisors. One such is Meeta Vyas, the first Indian woman to head a major US Corporation as CEO of Signature Brands, a NASDAQ company. Another member is Rekha Malhotra aka DJ Rekha, instrumental in introducing bhangra beats to the US. She is the founder of Basement Bhangra.

The growing number of women entering the marketplace is re-

flected in the diverse experiences of the panelists and speakers that were selected for the 2008 Congress.

The opening Keynote presentation examined the precedent for women in leadership roles by comparing and contrasting the US and South Asia. Speakers also addressed the rapid global transition that has already begun, as women around the world work for multinational organizations; manage cross-border transactions and teams; and impact global policy.

Dr. Mira Kamdar, Author Planet India: The Turbulent Rise of the Largest Democracy and the Future of Our World, and Bernard Schwartz Fellow, Asia Society, moderated the session. Panelists included Washington based Shahla Aly, General Manager of Corporate and Business Groups Solutions Delivery Microsoft IT, Sharda Cherwoo, Partner, Ernst & Young, Punita Kumar-Sinha, Senior Managing Director, The Blackstone Group, Shafi Saxena, Global Brand Vice President, Dove Skin, and Mary Ellen Iskenderian, President and CEO, Women's World Banking.

"I thought there was an important opportunity for South Asian women to shape and influence mainstream perceptions of our community," recalls Ahuja. "I felt it was even more important that South Asian women were presented as experts and advisors -- an examination of the mainstream media and business platforms did not indicate this was the case. As the interest in South Asia grows

and thrives, organizations, like SAWLF, serve as a key resource to the media and Corporate America.

SAWLF strives to raise awareness and visibility for women in the marketplace and mainstream media through its speaker's bureau, monthly events, research and mentoring program as well as educational programs and networking opportunities. A partnership with the women's cable channel Oxygen allows SAWLF members to apply for a seed capital of \$25,000 for starting their own businesses; the forum has plans for more initiatives that increase women's access to capital.

Speakers at previous meetings have included Shivam Mallick Shah, a programme officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with an MBA from Harvard Business School. SAWLF's Women TRAILBLAZERS series have included the Muslim stand up comedienne Shazia Mirza.

The Congress 2008 Wellness Lounge featured Dr. Ami Shah Nagarajan, for an intimate conversation about recognizing and preventing medical conditions common to South Asian women including hypertension, diabetes, obesity, heart disease, osteoporosis, breast/cervical cancer, STDs, and mental health. Dr. Shah-Nagarajan also steered another presentation, "Hiding Divya" which explored the taboo associated with mental illness within the South Asian Community. Actress Madhur Jaffrey and film director Rehana Mirza participated.

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