Business leader and entrepreneur Elankumaran Selvmalar is taking spicy snacks to a new level with a truly unique and socially responsible way of driving a business.

A two time war refugee, Selvmalar first fled the civil war in Sri Lanka in 1987 together with her family. She ended up in a Sri Lankan Refugee Camp in India, where she met her husband. A few years later, in 1992, the couple moved back to Sri Lanka to raise a family, only to be forced to flee again due to the 2009 aftermath of the war. Her family found shelter in a new camp, but her husband left her for another woman, leaving her with two children to support by herself.

But where others would have given up, Selvmalar turned the setbacks into a well of motivation. Now, Selvamalar uses her story as a driving force for her company’s mission: to not only support herself, but to support other women in her situation.

Q: Before you started your business you worked in a factory producing spicy snacks. A similar product to what you are selling. What made you take the step to start your own business?
A: I worked in the factory while me and my children were living in a camp for refugees. In 2011 I could get resettled in my old village again and had to leave the factory. The job opportunities here were limited to maid-work. I wanted more and was eager to do something that could inspire both my children and other women around me. I still had the skills I learned in the factory, and I had the idea of starting my own production. I managed to get funding to build a kitchen and to get my hands on the unprocessed materials I needed to launch.

Q: How did you manage to grow your client base?
A: I started very locally, focusing on clients in my own village. In the beginning, my marketing was very sales oriented – I would meet with different store owners face-to-face and sample products. This proved a bit of a struggle since this kind of behavior isn’t considered appropri-
ate for women in Sri Lanka, but I couldn't care about that. You could say I did not just do this for me – I wanted to change the conditions for all women, and this was just a part of it. The efforts I put in have resulted in deals with buyers from many different locations and it's the foundation upon which my company is built.

**Q:** You say you did it to change the conditions for all women, do you feel you made an impact?

**A:** Apart from me, my company now has 7 employees. All of them women who, like me, have been abandoned by their husbands or who are widowed. I've also supported and trained a few other women to start their own companies and get into the snack production business. As an entrepreneur, my mission is to support other women and I am so proud to be able to say that there are women who have benefitted from me in many ways. I define the growth of my business by the number of employment opportunities I can provide to women like.

**Q:** What is your next step?

**A:** I get plenty of invites to speak at conferences and meetings. And what I'm looking forward to most in my company, is improving the employment benefits. We are introducing health and insurance plans for all employees and we are going to increase our basic salaries. Over the coming years, we are looking to increase the number of employees to make sure we benefit as many women as possible in our community.