

Female Empowerment Fundamental for India ' s Economic Growth

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- Though legislation giving women equal rights and opportunities exists, it has not remedied systematic female discrimination.
- The fundamental problem relates to negative perceptions and stereotypes of women: changing these perceptions will require a multi-level, sustained campaign throughout society.
- If women ' s value is not recognized and their marginalization continues, India will never reach economic superpower status on the global stage.
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National Capital Region, Gurgaon, India, 8 November 2012 – A panel of experts in the session “ Changing Mindsets: India ' s Missing Women ” today at the World Economic Forum on India, addressed the widespread phenomenon of devaluation and marginalization of women in Indian society. Though legislation giving women equal rights and opportunities exists, it has not remedied systematic female discrimination.

The problem of enforcement is related to deep-seated cultural perceptions of women in Indian society and ongoing disempowerment of the agents of change, namely the women themselves. Only a multi-level campaign involving political, economic, cultural, civic, education and media stakeholders can have sufficient reach and impact to break down commonly-held female stereotypes and provide women with the tools to assume an active role in shaping their own lives, panelists said.

Krishna Tirath, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Women and Child Development of India, said that the government has passed acts on protecting women from domestic violence, dowry prohibition and workplace quotas. It has also launched the Sabla scheme that provides adolescent girls with health, nutrition, education and life skills. Still, the preference towards boys is a deep-rooted cultural norm which places India at 105th among 135 countries in the World Economic Forum ' s Global Gender Gap Report 2012.

The panellists agreed that legislation must be coupled with female empowerment. Jasmine Whitbread, Chief Executive Officer, Save the Children International, United Kingdom, and Co-Chair of the World Economic Forum on India, proposed implementing “ a multi-level sustained campaign ” to break down gender taboos and create an environment of change. This would have to take place on many fronts – government (state and local), business, civil society, cultural institutions, educational systems and the media.

Several of the panellists illustrated the impact of multilateral mobilization which challenges “ the conspiracy of silence ” within the framework of their own specific projects. Mallika Sarabhai, Director, Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, India, said that for legislation to work, citizens need to know that the police and other state authorities will respond to complaints about female abuse. Her “ Nirbhaya ” Campaign in Kerala involves working with local government to make the state women-friendly through the implementation of a three-point agenda: prevention, prosecution and protection.

Anuradha Koirala, Founder, Maiti Nepal, Nepal, raises awareness of women and child trafficking while informing victims about how to protect themselves. She does this by going from village to village with a group of policemen, judges, media representatives and students, listening to the experiences of women and then spreading the message about trafficking law, how to report incidents and where to get medical assistance (for sexually-transmitted diseases). One of the problems is a lack of positive female role models in the rural

environment.

Chhavi Rajawat, Head Sarpanch of Soda, Village Council of Soda, embarked on a project to mobilize women to participate in the village council as elected officials. These projects call attention to things that facilitate the empowerment process. Rajawat emphasized the importance of family-planning to free women up and of training to develop female competence in different areas.

Rajendra Singh Pawar, Chairman, NIIT Group, India, observed that technology, specifically mobile phones, improves female connectivity and has resulted in a decline in domestic violence rates. Sarabhai stressed that one can use media, for example TV shows, to create young role models who can then go out into the public to disseminate new ideas and values to men and women.

The panellists concluded that India today is at a crossroads. It could become an economic superpower. However, growth will be derailed if 50% of the population continues to be marginalized, devalued and even denied the gift of life.

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