

Leading the women of India to self empowerment

India, today, presents a picture of the best and the worst scenarios for women who constitute 48% of our population. More and more women are making their mark in all spheres of life. Besides the traditional areas of education, health and hospitality, women professionals are now increasingly contributing to the thriving new sectors of finance, IT, media, management and research. There is a new-found confidence and an exciting awareness of the possibilities before women and it seems that women want to make up for lost opportunities.

Unfortunately only a small number of our women can report such good news. In most places women are still subjugated and dominated. They languish in unhappy homes or in the unorganised sectors of livelihood where they are willfully exploited. They are disadvantaged in every way - in terms of literacy, developmental participation and earnings. Forty percent of them are illiterate and large numbers of our school-going girls drop out at middle school for various reasons. Female foeticide is on the rise and maternal mortality is the second highest in the world. Millions of Indian women have little or no access to health and sanitation. Daily, thousands of women all over India walk miles to fetch water and firewood. They also have to attend to all the household chores - because that is not supposed to be a man's work - ending up with no time and energy for self development or enterprise. For the vast majority of women in India there is little to hope for. They are staring at a blank wall.

The Economic Survey for 2003-04 estimated that in the total organised sector, there are 18.1% women employed. Even in the corporate sector, that swears by meritocracy, the track record of women participation is no better. In 2006 CII conducted a survey on white-collar staff in 149 member companies across different sectors and regions and the results were quite disturbing: on an average, these companies had only 6% women on their rolls.

This is highly unfortunate, as development experience shows that women hold the key to social development - especially in the critical areas of health, literacy, self-employment schemes and saving mobilisation. Keeping women out is undermining these efforts by half!

The paradox of potential

India needs leaders at all levels - both women and men - who are aware of the paradox of our country aiming to be an economic powerhouse when half its population can't even realise its inherent potential. These leaders have to emerge in government, business and in the social sector. While we do need men who share the vision and sensitivity of a Mohammed Yunus who is transforming the lives of women in Bangladesh, it is essential that we have many more women achievers and role models from all walks of life - women who can come to grips with the complex reality of women in our country.

Twenty-first century India is waiting for leaders who can explore alternatives and fulfill dreams, and who can also help other women to shape their own lives. We need people who will link their destinies with that of the millions of women who need to be awakened and helped to lead empowered lives to make a difference. We need leaders who will lead not from the power of their positions, but from the power that comes from living exemplary lives and who lead by their own example. People like Mahatma Gandhi, who is my role model.

Other than the patience of a sage and the stamina of a long distance runner, what are the attributes and skills of the leaders of women? Let me try and pinpoint some of them:

First of all, they will need to stand up to the age old male dominated world view that determines and continues to dictate women's role in society. This view of women has confined them to servility and "prescribed" them in passive roles of service and nurture. Our communities that glorify the male child and even deny a girl's right to live, make this necessary task of questioning the patriarchal mindset very difficult. For example, though the 1993 constitutional amendments opened up one-third of the village councils to women representatives, we read reports of elected women members facing resistance and violence from men who resent the reality of women occupying positions of leadership.

Even more than the blinkered worldview of men, it's women's own internalised self image that poses the biggest challenge. For centuries she has passively accepted her subordinate role and the decisions that men have made about her life and "destiny". Even educated and seemingly successful women are held back by the scripts they have internalised, and the limits they have set for themselves. For the emerging leaders of women in India, more than anything else, it will be a relentless struggle to influence a change in this tenaciously held mindset. It is a huge challenge as it would mean making mothers conscious of the different messages that they give to their boys and girls as they grow up. Usually, most families groom sons for achievements and daughters for harmonious relationships.

As more women strive for change, we need leaders who can coax the legal system to work to the benefit of women. We have a very progressive constitution and laws that protect our rights. But our track record is pathetic when it comes to enforcement. We need leaders who are aware of the tremendous possibilities of affirmative legal action and who have the guile and stamina to make the law move, even if with glacial slowness. Whether it is enforcing the sexual harassment policy within a company, or the Minimum Wages Act at construction sites or using the powerful Right to Information Act, leaders need to make the legal system their ally and their strike force.

The new leaders have to awaken the innate entrepreneurial spirit of women. Lack of education and opportunities force millions of women to work on the fields, construction sites or in occupations that hardly bring them a steady income. It is apparent that the organised sector cannot absorb even a fraction of these under-skilled women. They have to be encouraged to acquire the skills and finance to start their own small enterprises. That's how Mahila Griha Udhog (Lijjat papads) started in a small way with a small group of women. Today it is a Rs.300 crore enterprise, which also provides a livelihood to a lot of men!

And, from self help groups to cooperatives, there are successful models to organise and channel the potential of our women. SEWA (The Self Employed Employed Women's Association), since its inception in 1971 has been a remarkable success. Its many initiatives include the SEWA bank which today has 50,000 depositors and a working capital of Rs.10 crores. Thanks to the extensive training programmes held by National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), today there are over 2,400 all-women milk cooperatives are functioning in the country. It is estimated that women only Self Help Groups have helped over 20 million poor households to gain access to formal banking system. For women working in a private company or a government organisation, there are ample opportunities to translate good intentions into good work. After all, we can do with leadership at the rural and urban grassroots and in the boardrooms.

Emotional and intellectual resources

In a world challenged and changed by the forces of globalisation, there are opportunities and threats for women. been functioning effectively as a labour union, co-operative and women's movement. Along with new avenues for the educated and the relatively privileged, there is also the stark reality of loss of jobs and homes by social displacements which affect the women and children the most. We need leaders who will bring their emotional and intellectual resources to soften the savage ways of mindless development. Sustainable development is no longer a seminar fad or a cocktail subject for the affluent

and privileged. Catastrophic climate change will affect the livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable, who constitute a significant section of our marginalised women. In these bewildering times of change, there have to be leaders who can set the agenda of growth that includes the welfare of our deprived people. In other words, inclusive growth.

Our society is wracked by social divisions along communal and caste lines. For moving ahead and integrating our neglected millions into productive ways of living, the new leaders will have to work for social harmony and see beyond divisive and parochial concerns. And if people, especially women, are to benefit from developmental work of any kind, it is also essential that the leaders stand up and speak out against corruption. It is absolutely essential we have a breed of leaders who have the courage to say no to corruption and who set an example by their own personal integrity. This will give courage to others to do the same.

While we need to imbibe the best from all parts of the world, there is so much that is innately wise and lasting in our own practices. Hopefully, the new generation of leaders will have the conviction to implement models and practices organic to the ethos and spirit of our societies. As they say, don't reinvent the wheel.

(Anu Aga is a Director of Thermax Limited)