

Technology must be leveraged to educate and employ the maximum number of women. Businesses can play a critical role in giving them equal opportunities

WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS IN CORPORATE INDIA

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The Covid outbreak accentuated the gender divide with women, mainly from underprivileged backgrounds, bearing the brunt of the economic and social fallout. As we move towards a Covid-free India, the participation of women, particularly at the decision-making level, will steer the pace of social and economic revival to give shape to the new, post-pandemic India that is emerging.

Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is critically important, and has been spotlighted as a Sustainable Development Goal by the United Nations. To achieve gender equality by 2030, all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere must end, as must harmful practices such as child marriage. Moreover, unpaid care by women must be recognised and valued. These are amongst several other changes that the SDG targets. It is also essential to ensure the participation of women and provide them equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

While some ground has been covered, gender inequality remains a deep-rooted problem. According to a 2022 Special Re-

port brought out by the UNDP titled 'New threats to human security in the Anthropocene: Demanding greater solidarity', women have lower earnings, which impacts their spending capacity and savings, leaving them more vulnerable to economic shocks due to unexpected calamities like Covid-19. The report states that in 2021, around 435 million women and girls were living on less than \$1.90 a day, including the 47 million pushed into poverty during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A recent report by the Pew Research Center titled 'How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society', based on a survey of 29,999 Indian adults conducted from November 2019 to March 2020, reveals a mix of attitudes. For instance, a large proportion of Indians still support sex-selective abortions.

The International Women's Day on March 8 again turned the spotlight on women and their potential, which, if harnessed optimally, can accelerate economic growth. According to McKinsey, India can add up to \$770 billion (more than 18%) to its GDP by 2025 by ensuring equal opportunities for women.

The government is committed

to empowering women with schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Ujjawala, Mission Shakti, Mission Vatsalya, Poshan 2.0 and Saksham Anganwadi highlighted in the Budget 2022, which aim to leverage technology to strengthen processes and mechanisms to benefit women and children.

This is the century when women-led development can change the trajectory for India. This will be possible if there are significant changes across the board, beginning with educational opportunities for the girl child. Girls should be encouraged to take up STEM subjects, which will lead to more joining related fields.

Corporate India can play a critical role in encouraging women and giving them equal opportunities. The firms should ensure there are no gender bi-

ases at the recruitment level.

Technology, a great equaliser, must be leveraged to educate and employ the maximum number of women. In fact, due to the pandemic, which ushered in work from home and flexible working hours enabled by technology, the participation of women in the workforce in the formal sector has increased. As per the QES (Quarterly Economic Survey), women's share in total employment stood at 32.1% in Q2 FY22, rising from 29.3% in Q1 FY22. Not only have more women joined the formal workforce, several have adopted the self-employment route, thus creating more jobs.

Better infrastructure support in terms of creches for young mothers would ensure that women do not need to drop out of the workforce at any stage in their lives. More humane HR policies should be adopted to create a genuinely inclusive workspace.

While there is an increase in the number of women in boardrooms, they should be empowered to lead in roles critically important to the organisation. Women continue to play a vital role in India's development. The contribution of a woman working in the fields and a female

CEO are equally important in pushing the line on gender equality forward.

Recognising the potential of women and to accelerate their empowerment, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) began identifying and recognising grassroots women who have emerged as community leaders through an award since 2005. Over the years, CII expanded its initiatives to recognise grassroots women leaders and empower them through capacity building, coaching and mentoring. The CII Foundation Woman Exemplar Program has created a network of almost 100 exemplars driving social change at the grassroots level. To help these professionals reach their full economic potential, the CII Indian Women Network has offerings such as a Campus-to-Career Program and opportunities for mentorship for them, and a tool to help industry self-assess on parameters to make the workspace gender positive and more conducive for women.

March 8 gave us all the opportunity to reassess and refocus our attention on gender equality to create a more equitable India. We must utilise this to shift the needle.

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