

Education Key to Bridging the Gender Gap



L-R: **Navita Mahajan**, Researcher & Academic, Punjabi University; **Kavita Bhartiya**, Founder, Ogaan; **Krishna Bose**, Former Chairperson of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs in India; **Manju Bharat Ram**, Chairperson, Shriram School; **Naina Lal Kidwai**, Group General Manager and Country Head, India, The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Ltd.; Moderator: **Suhel Seth**, Managing Partner, Counselage

Economic independence and empowerment of women emerged as the main route to bring respect into gender equation at the **Ideas India 2008** seminar conducted here by **Aspen Institute India**.

Panelists at the concurrent session on '**Gender and Society: What Women Want**' agreed that things have already begun to change for

the better and empowerment should come through economic, educational and legislative means.

The first speaker, **Ms Krishna Bose, Former Chairperson of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs of India**, said that the attitude of political parties towards the women reservation bill reflected the state of society. "We have wasted so many years but could not settle the women reservation issue." Her Private Members' Bill to make a one-line amendment to the Representation of People's Act to made it mandatory for all political parties to

field a certain percentage of women in the elections, faced a similar fate. She said we have women leaders but not empowered women at the society level.

Ms Bose, however, noted that education is not necessarily the tool for bringing the change in attitudes. She gave the example of Phoolan Devi who had no education but had a lot of common sense to become a leader.

Ms Navita Mahajan, Researcher and Academic, Punjabi University, said our women have freedom of thought but not freedom of action. We often hear that we in India respect women. It has become a cliché. "We cannot ask for respect from others. It is for us to get respect by first start respecting ourselves," she said. Sex ratio is highly skewed in the two northern states of Punjab and Haryana, which are certainly not the poorest states in the country. She finds education to be the biggest tool to bridge the gap between freedom of thought and freedom of action.

Ms Naina Lal Kidwai, Group General Manager and Country Head, India, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Ltd, said that women do not want to be discriminated either positively or negatively. They want to come up the ladder on merit. She said that because women have to drop out because of their own reasons and roles in the society, there should be a policy to make their reentry or reemployment easy.

Ms Kavita Bhartiya, Founder, Ogaan, said the it is poverty that bring aggression of men against women to the forefront. She said that education is a must for empowerment.

Ms Manju Bharat Ram, Chairperson, Shriram School, said that education is not the panacea for gender equality. She noted that sex ratio imbalance is the highest among the educated and the rich. Women have to be economically independent to get respect and get involved in the decision making.

Mr Suhel Seth, Managing Partner, Counselage, who moderated the discussion, kicked off the discussion by saying that we always pay a lot of lip service to the issue but have not yet begun to respect women in the social perspective.

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