

Sustainable Gender Equality

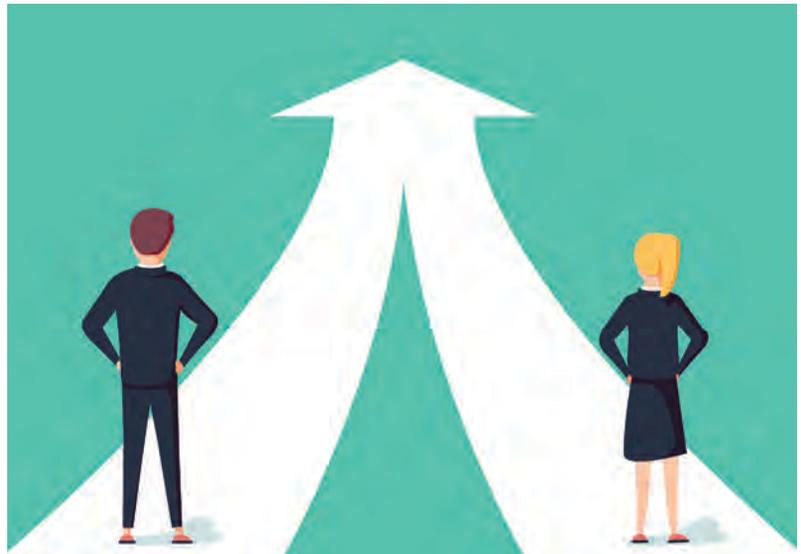
The concept, of gender equality in context of sustainable development goals has been a part of India since time immemorial. To The country believes in, “Yatra naryastu pujiyante ramante tatra Devata, yatra itaastu na pujiyante sarvaastatrafalaah kriyaah”, a famous sloka from Manusmriti, which means, ~ ‘Where women are honoured, divinity blossoms, and where they are dishonoured, all action remains unfruitful.’ The very quote reflects how ahead of times we Indians had been in keeping women power at high pedestal.

Hon'ble Finance Minister Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman, in her maiden speech on Budget 2019-20, quoted Swami Vivekanand's letter to Swami Ramakrishna, "there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing" thereby stating that India can make significant progress with greater participation of women by encouraging and facilitating the role of women in India's growth story. Read on...



CA. Anuradha Jain

The author is a member of the Institute. She can be reached at anuradhajain1507@gmail.com and eboard@icai.in



The best barometer to measure the progress of a nation is knowing how women are treated in the country. There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. The role of women in society and business cannot be undermined as women have proved their mettle in handling finance and other complex and strategic matters in their homes and businesses. Women have proved themselves, beyond doubt, in every aspect of society and have acquired indomitable position as fighter for independence, ruler of country. They have marked their presence in making strategies, economics and finance, decision making

and leading people. Economic empowerment of women is highly connected with poverty reduction as women tend to invest more of their earnings in their children and communities. Indian women themselves have played a key role in claiming a space for themselves in India's work force.

To say that gender equality is being followed by the country, given the Indian traditions or in view of the statements made by the government, would not be alright. At grassroot level, the real picture differs considerably when it comes to gender equality. In the country that worships goddesses, instances of female foeticide still prevails.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India believes in creating equal opportunities for women. Women Members Empowerment Group is a focused body seized to formulate and implement plans, policies for empowerment of Women members.

Going by its definition, gender equality means, the state in which access to rights or opportunities are unaffected by one's gender. This concept was reaffirmed in United Nation's General Assembly on December 10, 1948, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, birth or other status."

Gender equality is Goal 5 of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals of United Nations to make world a better place to live in. In fact, women have a critical role to play in all of the SDGs, with many targets specifically recognising women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution. The goal to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' is known as the stand-alone gender goal, because it is dedicated to achieving these

ends. Deep legal and legislative changes are needed to ensure women's rights around the world.

With regards to gender equality a record 143 countries guaranteed equality between men and women in their Constitutions by 2014. Women and girls represent half of the world's population and, therefore, also half of its potential. Gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peace, with full human potential and sustainable development. Moreover, it has been shown that empowering women helps in increasing productivity and lead to economic growth. Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women. It is also essential to achieve equal opportunities in access to employment and to positions of leadership and decision-making at all levels.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India believes in creating equal opportunities for women. Women Members Empowerment Group is a focused body seized to formulate and implement plans, policies for empowerment of women members. The group is also maintaining a portal to assist women with their specific issues. The group takes a number of activities for the benefit of women members with the following objectives:

- Explore professional opportunities for women and work towards their empowerment.

- Organise conferences, training and other programmes.
- Interact with various stakeholders on matters relating to growth and development of women members.

South Asian Federation of Accountants (SAFA), which is an Apex body of SAARC and an Acknowledged Accountancy Grouping of International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) in one of its recent Board meeting unanimously accepted the proposal of ICAI and decided to constitute SAFA Women Empowerment Committee for the women members of the SAFA Region. Committee of SAFA will conceive, formulate and implement plans, policies and programmes for development of Women Members in the SAARC Region.

Unfortunately, in society there are cases where equality is disrespected on various grounds. Fortunately, chartered accountants face no such bias, female chartered accountants being 26% of ICAI's membership base. Equal respect and opportunities are open in this field, but struggle starts in the real world where people are gender biased. Women too are entitled to enjoy their human rights and be free from all forms of discrimination. Yet directly or indirectly discrimination against women persists in many areas vis-a-vis social

norms, practices and gender-based stereotypes. Gender equality before the law does not necessarily mean that women in practice have equal opportunities. Glimpse as under:

Issues and Concerns

Scenario 1: Hiring advertisement, both male and female can apply, candidate need to travel frequently, mostly field work in the rural areas.

Resultant : No women can apply for the job. Clear message is given in the above scenario that the opening is favourable for male candidates.

Scenario 2 : Women earn between 10 and 30% less than men.

Resultant: Lower propensity to save and invest, more insecure employment.

Scenario 3: If women wants to pursue her career, she is seen as over ambitious, less suitable in view of family needs.

Resultant: Either she quits her career or compromises with the opportunities available to her.

There may be more such scenarios where a women is found fighting hard, despite being equally qualified and deserving in the required area. The struggle is visibly prevalent at home, office and society front.

Measures to Check Discriminations

An increasing number of countries are currently introducing various types of gender quotas for public elections. In fact, a large number of countries in the world, today use some type of electoral quota for their parliament. Quota systems aim at ensuring minimum level of women participation in country's policies and decision making processes.

Implementing Gender Quotas

Incidentally, India implemented gender quotas long before the global resolution. In 1993, two years before the Beijing Conference, India introduced gender quotas in its third tier of government, namely the local governments, through constitutional amendments. Within two decades, this move has notably increased the representation of women in these elected bodies from a mere 3-4% to an impressive 43%.

There may be more such scenarios where a women is found fighting hard, despite being equally qualified and deserving in the required area. The struggle is visibly prevalent across various fronts.

The bias has been there for long time and that has given women infinite patience and perseverance. The idea of perfect womanhood is

perfect independence. The practical and social issues can be addressed by, changing the approach and mindsets of people.

One can take inspiration from women chartered accountants who have conquered many such obstacles and have catapulted themselves to pinnacles of their career. R. Sivabhogam, the first female chartered accountant of India, Naina Lal Kidwai, Padma Shri recipient, Dhivya Suryadevara, former Chief Financial Officer of General Motors, are the ones to name a few.

India could boost its growth substantially, if half of the total women population join the work force. Efforts are being made to promote women in every segment to take prime positions. Section 149 of the Companies Act, 2013 is a provision in Companies Law which states that a board should have a female director in order to meet the objective of maintaining an unbiased and proper management. In India, the Companies Act, 2013 imposes a quota of at least one female director on the board of listed companies and any public company having a paid-up share capital of ₹ 100 crores or more or a turnover of ₹ 300 crores or more.

Today, India boasts of nearly one million women panchayat leaders – a number that is an indicator of the leadership roles women are increasingly taking up.

In India, the Companies Act, 2013 imposes a quota of at least one female director on the board of listed companies and any public company having a paid-up share capital of ₹ 100 crores or more or a turnover of ₹ 300 crores or more.

Cultural and Social Pressure

Ironically, there have been number of cases where educated married women have been found burdened by the social pressures of in-laws and as a result drop out of the work force after marriage. Nevertheless, they were making noteworthy contributions to their jobs.

There are also instances of women willingly leaving their jobs. There is also a noted differentiation in culturally accepted priorities for men and women. For women, the disproportionate pressure to sustain the marriage, manage the household, bear and bring up children alongside careers naturally push them to often compromise with their work life aspirations.

Work culture in India also adopts similar attitude and would rather relieve young mothers or women from jobs on account of conservative social norms rather than investing in arrangements such as:

- Providing secure congenial work environment.
- Assisting them with more flexible working hours.
- Providing facilities for travelling such as pick-up and drop.
- Providing crèches or day care facilities for their children.

Employers need to walk the talk and commit to supporting diversity in the workplace by hiring women and paying them the wages at par with men in similar jobs. Women need safe transportation and zero tolerance of harassment at workplace. At the same time there are many new age organisations that are promoting female employees by providing healthy environment, good facilities, maternity leaves and so on.

Some more promising signs are the government's program for skills development, subsidised loans for businesses led by women, enhanced maternity leave, and requiring childcare facilities in companies that employ more than 50 people. If implemented and respected, these policies could remove some of the barriers women face and offer a significant boost to India's economy. The results of such initiatives can be really rewarding as the country has potential to add significantly to its GDP, simply by giving equal opportunities to women.

Conclusion:

Over time things have reached different dimensions. While discrimination on the basis of gender at home and work places is reducing, the struggle has taken a different shape. Women working in organisations have to struggle in offices for their existence, survival and growth.

Gender equality can help in achieving other goals by contributing directly to reduce poverty, improve health, provide education, lead to economic growth and so on

While there are women dominating matriarchy society like in Middle Southeast Asian countries, there are other countries that are not able to provide equal opportunity to women. Women should start early to get on to the path of becoming future professionals. Workload at home needs to be equitably divided, thereby fostering a better environment. Creation of better jobs, providing child care support, elder care, and ensuring mobility to and from work can significantly remove some of the structural barriers for women to take up and continue employment.

Gender equality can help in achieving other goals by contributing directly to reduce poverty, improve health, provide education, lead to economic growth and so on. ■