

Women's Leadership: the Key to Advancing Millennium Development Goals

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“India leads the world in...” – the Indian professionals in Silicon Valley could fill in this opening line with all kinds of good news related to India’s rate of economic growth, its outsourcing industry, or its production of engineers. Yet, for those of us committed to Millennium Development Goal # 3, the elusive goal of gender equity, without which no other goal is even remotely attainable, this sentence does not end well. Rather, it ends like this . . . India leads the world in female infanticide and mortality – leading to one of the most imbalanced gender ratios in history – an estimated 927 girls to every 1000 males alive in India today. This anomaly which has resulted in millions of missing girls, according to Nobel Laureate and economist, Amartya Sen, is the result of India’s long standing cultural preference for sons over daughters.

The statistics on missing girls in India serve as a stark testimony to the long road that lies ahead for advocates of women’s rights and gender equity. India remains a contradiction in so many ways. On the one hand, India was among the first developing nations to be led by a woman head of state, on the other, the Indian government has made only limited progress in its efforts to challenge long standing traditional practices that discriminate against women and girls, including son preference, early marriage, dowry, and endemic violence against women. Although the Indian constitution and Indian laws provide numerous protections that guarantee the equality of women, enforcement of such provisions remains weak at best, and non-existent for the vast majority of Indian women and girls.

Yet, remarkably, Indian women continue to defy the odds against them by demonstrating

extraordinary levels of courage, vision, and determination in their struggle for equality and justice. Women's groups from India submit close to 500 requests a year to the Global Fund for Women – evidence that they are refusing to accept the status quo that keeps women second class citizens in the world's largest democracy. These proposals come from fisherwomen's associations in coastal Andhra Pradesh, from Dalit women's groups in Chattisgarh, from sexworkers in Calcutta, from teachers offering Muslim girls an education in the old city of Hyderabad, from lesbian rights groups in Mumbai, and from Adivasi or tribal communities in remote parts of the Northeastern states. These advocates ask for our help to open shelters that offer victims of violence a safe place, or support in their work to educate women and girls about their human rights, to address the high rates of infant and maternal mortality, to develop programs to organize and mobilize women workers in some of the most underpaid sectors of the economy. They are brave, they are outspoken, and they are not afraid to face opposition.

In our almost 20 year history, the Global Fund for Women has provided more than \$50 million in grants to women-led organizations in 163 countries to advance a just, compassionate and democratic world where women and men participate equally in all aspects of society. Of that amount, we have made 233 grants totaling more than \$2 million to daring, innovative women's groups across India.

Our first grant in India was made to a leader in the anti-violence movement, Vimochana - Forum for Women's Rights, based in Bangalore. In 1996, soon after I had the privilege of joining the Global Fund for Women as the new President and CEO, my review of the grants made to Indian women's organizations made it clear that the Global Fund was reaching out into parts of the country not normally reached by donor agencies, particularly those based in the United States or Europe. A large number of our grants went to women's groups in small and mid-sized cities and towns, rather than to those located in the largest metropolitan centers. Significant attention was being paid to women who were marginalized by virtue of their location in poor rural areas, or as a result of their belonging to lower caste communities.

It was striking that the Global Fund's model of using locally based advisors was key in our success in reaching such groups. Instead of sending program officers flying in to Delhi or Mumbai for short 3 week visits, the Global Fund developed an extensive network of local advisors, who were grounded in the Indian women's movement and whose knowledge of and connections to women's rights associations was deep and broad. These advisors included women like Indira Jena and Kaval Gulhati. Indira went on to found the first Indian Women's Fund, Nirnaya, which is based in Hyderabad and now educates middle class Indians to see themselves as philanthropists. Their contributions support grassroots women's organizations in 6 Indian states. Kaval, one of the Global Fund's earliest Board members, had years of experience through working with international development organizations, such as CEDPA (Centre for Development and Population Activities), and brought a deep understanding of reproductive health and rights to our grantmaking. Her membership on the Board was aligned with the Global Fund's commitment to having our Board membership reflect the diversity and richness of the global women's movement.

Women's rights leaders in India have always demonstrated a clear analysis of the multiple challenges that face women. Poverty and women's lack of economic opportunities are as much a concern as traditions that marginalize or negate women. In fact, when I look at the grant applications from Indian women's groups, it is clear that they see how gender inequality reinforces trends that impoverish women. A common example: if young girls are denied the same educational opportunities as boys because they are not seen as being capable or because they are simply expected to get married at an early age, they will grow into young women who are ill-equipped to participate in the labor force. They are more likely to be clustered in the lowest paying, least skilled sectors of the economy and they will probably lack knowledge of or access to contraceptive technology that could allow them to space and plan their families. In turn, large families, particularly those with large numbers of girls, place additional burdens on women, who face both violence at home and greater economic pressures related to ensuring that daughters can be married. The practice of paying large sums of dowry to the families of grooms at the time of marriage reinforces the sense that girls are an

economic liability, therefore leading families to seek to minimize the number of girls born. This is achieved, depending on the economic resources available to a family, either by using technology such as sex-selective abortion, or simply by neglecting girl children from the time of their birth.

The transformation of India's economy over the past few decades as a result of liberalization, privatization, and global competition has had a profound impact on the lives of women. For those privileged to have some degree of education, it has opened new doors, provided newfound independence and is beginning to transform old patterns of social submission and deference. As young women working in call centers and software companies gain economic independence they are also demanding a greater say in the decisions that affect their lives, from the terms of their marriages to the choice of contraception. On the other hand, millions of poor rural women have been adversely affected by global competition and privatization of basic services, such as water. Thousands have been widowed in the recent spate of farmer suicides brought on by indebtedness and inability to compete with imported corn, cotton, and rice. The massive economic dislocation of rural families has forced thousands of young women to migrate in search of the most backbreaking basic forms of manual labor – women can be found breaking stones by hand to help build India's most modern highways. Women are also vulnerable to being trafficked into sexual and domestic servitude as they seek some form of economic security. Across India the pressures to modernize and privatize to meet the needs of the growing middle class are also putting incredible stress on natural resource systems, such as forests and rivers. Women are often trapped by these developments, as were the hundreds of thousands of Gujarati villagers, who would have been displaced by the massive Narmada dam.

These contradictions are being addressed by a new generation of women leaders in India. Often they are leading in areas that most people rarely associate with "women's rights". They include Medha Patkar, a leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, who urges us to look beyond the narrow gains of increased electric power and to think of the price we will pay for such environmental destruction. They include the young animal health workers

of Yakshi, an Adivasi group based in Andhra Pradesh, who combine their knowledge of herbs and roots with western veterinarian science to preserve traditional livestock and seeds. They include groups such as Breakthrough for Human Rights that uses commercial media such as music videos to convey powerful messages that reveal how married women face increased risk of HIV infection from their husbands, and so encourage men to wear condoms or be faithful to demonstrate caring and reduce infection.

These women are not as celebrated as Sonia Gandhi, the head of the Congress Party of India. They may not be considered as powerful as Indira Nooyi, who as the new CEO of Pepsi was named the 5th most powerful woman in the world by Forbes magazine. They may never grace the front covers of Wired magazine, Indian American or India Today. Yet, they are the ones making the most radical and transformative changes in India – they are the ones who are likely to ensure that our daughters can look forward to a world in which they can be free of the stifling economic, social and political constraints, that have haunted generations of Indian women. They are the ones who will make it possible for the UN Millennium development goals to be realized in India. Those of us committed to advancing the MDGS in India, must take their lead and support their efforts. The Global Fund for Women feels honored and proud to be able to support at least a few of those voices that so deserve to be heard. We realize that ensuring such activism and leadership among women is perhaps the greatest single investment we can make to guarantee India's future ability to be a leader in a more just, more peaceful and more sustainable world.

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