

## **GENDER GAP: A BRIDGE STILL FAR- By Moin Qazi**

*All lives have equal value. No matter where they live on the planet. No matter what state, city, and country you're born in, whether you are male, female.*

– Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

The Gates Foundation captures in its mission goal the true spiritual concept of human creation. But today we know that not all lives have equal opportunity. Gender remains a critically important and largely ignored lens to view development issues across the world. Gender inequality is not only a pressing moral and social issue but also a critical economic challenge. India has a larger relative economic value at stake in advancing gender equality. However, despite some significant gains, some gaps remain. Although India has narrowed the divide between men and women in primary education and health sector, it doesn't measure well in major metrics for measuring gender parity.

India was placed at 108<sup>th</sup> position in the Global Gender Gap Index 2018 amongst 149 countries, behind China and Bangladesh and 10 notches below its own position in 2006. The unpaid care work of women amounted to 291 minutes daily in rural areas and 312 minutes in urban areas as compared to men who spent 29 minutes and 32 minutes in urban and rural areas respectively. Data available closer home substantiates this fact.

According to the McKinsey Global Institute, fully empowering women would add some \$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025. But despite decades of laudable policies and efforts, the world has failed to close the gender gap.

for most women – particularly women in developing countries – access to the formal labor market is restricted by a host of social, cultural and political barriers. Agriculture is among the most ubiquitous forms of female entrepreneurship. But, although women produce most of the world's food, they own less than one-fifth of the world's farmland.

Women experience barriers in almost every aspect of work, including:

- Whether they have paid work at all;
- The type of work they obtain or are excluded from;
- The availability of support services such as childcare;
- Their pay, benefits, and conditions of work;
- The insecurity of their jobs or enterprises and
- Their access to vocational training

All women, regardless of their marital status, need access to education, good jobs, and support for domestic duties. Both widows and married women deserve freedom from culturally

entrenched marital practices that degrade and commodify them, as well as legal protection from their husbands' debts. Although transforming long-held laws, beliefs and practices may be difficult, it is the only way to keep price tags off women and ensure that they have dignity as well as true economic agency. It has been said that women who are closest to the world's most pressing issues are best placed to solve them. In many countries, women are adjusting to large-scale economic changes through community-based grassroots organizing efforts. But can women be expected to use local solutions to clean up and compensate for larger economic problems without also being allowed to influence larger decisions?

What needs to be changed? Improvement in access to quality education for girls can boost their future income, save mothers' and children's lives, reduce rates of child malnutrition, and reduce overall poverty levels. For all interventions, the fundamental logic is plain: If we are going to end extreme poverty, we need to start with girls and women.

Women work tirelessly to end poverty and hunger in their families. But it can take much more than hard work. They need new tools to create their own paths forward. They need opportunities that can overcome economic, cultural and gender barriers. It needs multi-sectoral cooperation to create breakthrough ideas and solutions to break down economic, social and technical barriers.

We have for long made paternalistic decision to "*protect*" these women, thereby eliminating their ability to solve issues that they face. Why couldn't they decide for themselves how to manage their own situation? Why couldn't we equip them to decide how they can take their own decisions? The key levers for change, from the ground up, are clearly female education and women's access to income.

Fortunately, the world is now awakening to a powerful truth: Women and girls aren't the problem; they're the solution. Melinda Gates, who is now spearheading a major campaign for a proper time balance for the women, particularly the poor, commends three R's: "Recognize that unpaid work is still work. Reduce the amount of time and energy it takes. And redistribute it more evenly between women and men". Women are far more likely than men to spend money they have under their discretion on the education of their children, the health care for their family and improving their housing. They tend to invest their financial resources in their homes, the nutrition and health of their families, the education of their children, and their communities.

Providing women with a greater number of better opportunities to fulfill their social, economic, and political roles is now deemed so essential for reducing poverty and improving governance that women's empowerment has become a development objective in its own right. The key levers for change, from the ground up, are clearly female education and women's access to income. Women approach the future with creativity optimism and determination. They take economic ups and downs in stride. They show calm in the face of adversity. Above all, they work hard.

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forward. They need opportunities that can overcome economic, cultural and gender barriers. It needs multisectoral cooperation to create breakthrough ideas and breakthrough solutions that break through and break down economic, social and technical barriers. We live in a world in which women living in poverty face gross inequalities and injustice from birth to death.

The Executive Summary of High-Level Committee on the Status on Women, 2015 emphasizes that “there should be a significant increase in the gender equality investments in India, across Ministries and Departments. A comprehensive need mapping, district upwards, should be the basis for planning for future. A life cycle approach, social equity approach and an approach that covers all dimensions of empowerment should be used so that no group of women are left out”.

For all interventions, the fundamental logic is plain: if we are going to end extreme poverty, we need to start with girls and women. They are the ones who have the grit to lift families out of the pit. People who have pioneered successful social programmes recognized this potential and sought to evoke it.