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## Crossing barriers

Jaya Indiresan

*A recent article in a newspaper brought to the fore the fact that some of the big names in corporate India still don't have a single woman on the board. Though it made for an interesting read, did it make the companies rethink the issue?*



Another International Women's Day has come and gone, more as a token ritual than purposeful exercise. At best, these celebrations bring to the fore, though only momentarily, the problems faced by women. For example, on the eve of women's day, the *Times of India* came out with a front-page headline, 'India Inc. Still Doesn't Have Room For Women On Top'. Reliance, Hindustan Lever, M&M and Wipro do not have a single woman on their board. That makes interesting copy, but did it induce any of those companies to rethink, to consider inducting women on their boards?

A recent NCERT workshop came out with three types of barriers — personal, social and institutional. Personal barriers include lack of belief in oneself and one's own capacity, lack of motivation, initiative, assertiveness and unwilling to change or take risks. These personal factors put the onus on the woman herself for her low status. At the same time, in defence of the woman, it was argued that all these inhibitions are due to gender stereotyping right from childhood... bringing up the girl to be submissive and dependent instead of assertive. The patriarchal system makes sure that the woman is 'kept in her place' and does not cross the *Lakshman Rekha*.

Social barriers can be even more oppressive. The principal of a girls' college conducted a workshop on the evils of the dowry system and made the girls take an oath not to agree to marriage with dowry. When one of the girls protested against the dowry her parents wanted to give, they took the principal to task for interfering with family traditions.

Institutions can be even worse. There is hardly any institution without a glass ceiling. Year after year, girls

take away most of the top positions in school board examinations but, when it comes to leadership positions, they get lost without a trace. Some feel that few women have requisite technological, financial and marketing skills. Others blame it on the notion that women are not smart enough to deal with serious issues. Yet others attribute it to the woman's reluctance to take on responsibility because of her dual role in the family and the workplace.

But instead of cursing the darkness, let us see whether we can light a candle and dispel the darkness from the lives of women and usher in a brighter future. The corporate sector, government departments, NGOs and international donor agencies are all organising workshops and seminars on women's empowerment. Even ISRO has got into the act and is launching a dedicated satellite for a 72-channel, 24-hour, 7-day-a-week programme on women. Even then, these efforts are too few to address the large numbers involved as the malaise is deep-rooted.

There are many women in our part of the world who have become heads of governments. Without exception, all of them inherited their mantle. On the other hand, there is the case of Mata Amrithanandamayi; *Amma* to all her devotees, who has triumphed over every kind of barrier imaginable: The gender barrier, the caste barrier of being born in the lowly fisherman community, the poverty barrier, the barrier of living in a remote community, the language barrier of knowing no language except her dialect, the education barrier of being barely literate. Yet, she has established a huge complex with a super specialty hospital, a hi-tech deemed university, several state-of-the-art schools spread all over the country, thousands of homes gifted to the poor and a following of people who came from 186 countries to celebrate her birthday.

How did this lady with every possible handicap succeed to command literally millions of male hearts, while highly educated women flounder and even suffer marital abuse? Why is it that even in sophisticated Switzerland wife-beating is a serious problem that has required special laws to force judges to take notice?

Psychologists say that role models are important. *Amma* is so unusual that she cannot be a role model, but whether one is religious or not, it would be worth investigating what qualities made her succeed.

Picture by K. Ramesh Babu