

Fostering Sustainable Growth through a 5 ‘S’ Paradigm

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Despite the fact that India’s growth story is a well scripted one, with as many ardent followers as those in doubt, there is no denying that the growth is lopsided, in more ways than one; and, as common sense shows, anything that lacks balance is bound to topple over, in the long run.

Unlike popular belief that women have been occupying an increasingly prominent and dominant place, on the Indian national stage, figures reveal that even today, we have both a demographic and economic mismatch, where gender is concerned. While there are merely 923 women per a thousand men, according to india online, as per Akshat Rathi’s article in *The Hindu*, they contribute only 39% to the working force and the statistic gets worse, in the urban areas.

In the light of this fact, it is important not only in the context of women empowerment and liberation, but more importantly in the context of sustainable development of all the national matrices that women power should be harnessed to contribute to all indices that constitute the growth matrix.

And while it would be futile to deny that Indian women have occupied positions at the helm of affairs more often and in a larger number of areas than before, what is important to notice is that they constitute rare occurrences or appear as meteors that shine briefly before losing themselves in the light of the human galaxy. What this indicates is that these rare success stories latently emphasise that they serve as exceptions to the rule, which affirms that the Indian society is still largely and essentially patriarchal.

The issue that surrounds the success of Indian women is then one that Kofi Annan aptly expresses as “Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.” And thus, if sustainability has to be achieved, it is important to understand the dynamics that prevent it from becoming an occurrence that can be easily duplicated and sustained, while also charting a route that, if followed, would result in this becoming a possibility.

Ironically, though not surprisingly, the primary issue that ails the Indian society in the context of women is an unwillingness to acknowledge that there is a problem of societal inequality as regards gender on the one hand and on the other a perception that a woman is by nature secondary to the interests and capabilities of men, a perception so deep rooted that its presence is merely there, without even being realised as such. And while the former manifests itself primarily in two ways, as either a belief that women are equal and so there is no issue as such or worse still an argument that men are equally ill-treated as women are, both arguments being delusional in their own way, the latter becomes a justification and a cause for suppression. All in all, whatever the approach, it is a no win one, in the light of equality for women.

Given its all pervasive nature, this lack of awareness of the actuality that surrounds the status of women manifests itself in the secondary status, they occupy, in all walks of life, whether political, economic, social or cultural and, like the story of what came before the chicken or the egg, the cycle repeats itself, in an endless continuum. Women, who occupy positions of power, however rarely, either get so much focus that the fact that they constitute a very small minority gets obliterated or face so much hatred, difficulties, struggle and ridicule that their energies get diverted into maintaining the status quo, rather than moving ahead or using their position to shape/nurture other women. Moreover, their struggles often land up overshadowing their achievements, proving more to be a deterrent for other women or they are so few and far in between that they are dismissed for what they are, more an exception than the rule. Even in the rare moments that their success stories gain sustained attention, the glamour overshadows the reality of their rareness, making people believe that a rather unnecessary fuss is being made about women occupying a secondary status and in fact all is well with the social order.

It is ironic that in a society which calls itself a developing democracy, with the eyes of the world focussed on it, we still record only 45-46% literacy among women, 39% employment among women, barely a few success stories of women and regularly witness crimes against women, which in 2012 stood at 244270 and included rape 24,923, dowry deaths 8223, domestic violence/cruelty 106527, molestation 45351, kidnapping and abduction 38262, child marriage - over 1.5 million, according to the 2001 census, etc.; as also, female foeticide, which goes unrecorded, not to mention the unreported cases and unacknowledged crimes, like marital rape, unequal opportunities and the list can go on.

It is in this light that we need to assess, whether or not the shine on the Indian horizon is the afterglow of a sun that has already set or the light that shines essentially, in all its glory. Without sounding a despondent note or writing off the efforts and success stories of stalwarts in all walks of life, both women, who serve as citadels of hope or men, who have helped them on their way and lauded their successes with an open heart, it is important to assess why these beacons serve as momentary flashes of light, rather than emitting a sustained glow that can be transferred effortlessly from one source of glory to another. And, it is important to understand that India would truly reach its pinnacle, only if the success scripted by women is sustained both through numbers and time.

What primarily casts its shadow on the attempts of women to get their due and emerge at the top is the lack of the means, whether in the form of education or encouragement/support and the socio cultural constructs and taboos that tie them in chains and pull them back a few steps, every time they take one forward. The Indian society and cultural norms thus serve as an albatross that adds to making the endeavour of Sisyphus one doomed to failure. This is not however to undermine the successes of Kiran Maneckshaw, Chandra Kochhar, Arundhati Bhattacharya (the first woman Chairperson in the State Bank of India in the 206 years of its existence) and successful women from diverse other fields, who offer a ray of hope. What is needed however is to assess what made their success possible, so that the model can be successfully replicated by women, who desire to make a difference to their own lives and move ahead, but do not know how.

Given that, what primarily comes in the way of women's ability to reach the top is the belief that they can, this paper would underline five traits that women need to imbibe and nurture, to make their surging ahead possible and sustainable and share stories of ordinary women, who have made a difference, so that women can learn to believe that what the heart desires is possible, if the desire is strong and the belief is unflinching.

In the light of the fact that success begins and ends with an 'S', I have attempted to structure a 5 'S' paradigm that every woman can follow:

Considering that from their very birth, women are brought up to believe that they are secondary, with major or minor discriminations being made against them, by people either within their homes or outside it, or at times both, it is not surprising that women do not develop a feeling of self respect. Defined as a feeling of pride in yourself, that what you do, say etc. is right and good, self respect can enable a person to move forward, as it instils in the person a sense of courage, confidence and determination. Usually, women lack self respect, because they do not believe that they can stand on their own feet, given that a very few of them are even literate, let alone educated. This is not to say that uneducated women have not and cannot reach the heights of success, but if and when they do, they serve more as exceptions, than the rule.

Education in itself makes a woman aware about her rights and instils in her the capacity to understand what her duties and responsibilities actually are, as against what society expects of her, often to serve its own ends. It can be seen often, that women's education is sacrificed, because they are expected to earn for the family, look after their siblings, have to be married, or the family simply cannot afford to educate them. And, if and when, education is given to them, it is of the type and up to the level that is deemed appropriate by the family, rather than one that she desires for herself. Moreover, even in the metropolitan cities, a lot of women are provided with education, merely to enhance their value in the marriage market, rather than so that their education may help them stand on their feet and earn them the respect of themselves and others. Even today, in conservative, rich and qualified households, women are told that they can study, but may or may not be allowed to work. This, or their lack of education, has such a dampening effect on their self respect, that they are unable to stand up for their rights or to fend for themselves, even in times of crises, leading to other social evils like suicide, sati or

widows being treated shabbily in their household or even women continuing to live in a bad marriage. Thus, in order to maintain their sense of self respect, women need to be educated and need to use their education, rather than looking upon it as merely acquiring qualifications. Without denying that the government has taken some initiative in this light, through the 'Mulgi Shikli, Pragati Zhaali' campaign, across the country, the fact that the initiative is well conceptualised, but poorly executed, can be seen by the very fact that very few women in India are educated; and, even among the few, who are educated, a very small number is using their education, for their own betterment. A more effective step taken in this direction than the government's initiative is that of the *Teach For India* campaign that has been launched by Shaheen Mistry that targets teaching all, as education is what ultimately forms the basis of social change and merely equipping women can never really help in achieving the desired results.

A dream of helping slum children led her to establish Akansha in 1991, at the age of 18, to bring together three forces, which she knew existed, but needed to be brought together, to achieve the desired result – slum kids, college students, who had the energy, enthusiasm and time to teach, to serve as volunteers and spaces in schools for children, from low-income communities, which could be run by college students. Fighting to keep her dream alive, despite all odds - resistance from the parents of slum children, the children's own sincerity and the doubts that kept plaguing the student volunteers, she stood firm, forging ahead not merely to make a difference but also to win numerous awards for her work and be given the responsibility to replicate this model, at a much larger level – the national canvas, as the CEO of Teach for India that was launched in 2009. In little over five years, Teach for India is in 7 cities - Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, Chennai, Ahmedabad and Bengaluru, with a total of 910 Fellows and 660 Alumni, working towards eliminating educational inequity.

Complementary to addressing the issue of illiteracy that affects thinking and anchors social rigidity at the primary level is the need to deal with the issue of the security of women that can majorly hamper their efforts at gaining or maintaining a sense of self respect. Treated primarily as an object, women often see themselves in the light of their body and any violation of it is seen as a shame that the woman brings on herself, her family and at times even her community. Paradoxically, the person(s), who objectifies a woman in this manner and violates her body, is rarely punished, let alone considered as a criminal. In fact, quite often, men and even the society consider it the men's right, to violate a women's private space, and it is the woman, who is blamed, for making it happen/encouraging it in some way. What is still more ironical is that neither schools nor families, who consider the honour of a woman so valuable, deem it necessary to offer them training in self defence, so that any attempt at thwarting the women's private space can be dealt with firmly by them.

What is even sadder is that given this fact women more often than not rely on men to defend them, making it largely an exercise in redundancy, as men can never really understand their feeling of insecurity and fear, let alone experience it. And while it would be wrong to believe that every male gaze is misdirected, many a time it is and it cannot be perceived by other men, as they can never decode its presence. On occasions men also unconsciously feel a bonding with other man and, as a result, choose not to intervene. On the other hand, it is often the long drawn out legal process and a feeling that this cannot happen to someone I care for that makes people shy away from helping a person in trouble. The problem is therefore rampant and needs to be addressed in more ways than one. An interesting initiative in this light is that taken by Revathi Roy, the brain behind *Viira Cabs*, who realised that women, who are not accompanied by the men they know/trust, can actually only feel safe in the company of other women and therefore set up this enterprise, which not only made women travellers feel safer, but also generated employment for women, who needed to earn a living, and did not necessarily have the education to do so. While aiding inclusion, Viira cabs has also launched a training school for women and has equipped each car with a pepper spray and baton, while also grooming their taxi driver women to look professional, thereby creating not only jobs, but also solace for women and the families of women, who have to travel late.

It is only through this sense of self respect, a pride that they take in being themselves, rather than regretting their gender or being apologetic or cowed down as a result of it, that the women can develop self confidence. Given that men and women are born equal and it is the social conditioning that creates an inequality among them, a fact that can be borne out, if one were to think of the time people lived in caves, where they shared all types of responsibilities equally, women can learn to question this order, rather than accepting it as a given, only through self confidence. Most often, when unfairness goes unquestioned, it gets anchored as a given fairly quickly, as it

is to the advantage of the perpetrator of the discrimination; and, over time, it gains the rigidity of a tradition that is seemingly unquestionable. Incidentally, this malaise has become so deeply entrenched in the Indian society that women are made to be perpetrators of discrimination against other women, without realising that they need not become so and then become further targets of the cliché that women are their own worst enemies; for example, the mother in law/daughter in law or the infamous saas bahu relationship. Though it may not appear to be so, the solution to this problem is fairly simple, what women need to do is believe in themselves and their capabilities and not let social constructs bind them down, as can be seen in the case of Shweta Katti, who overcame all odds, by being determined to reach out and fulfil her dreams. The daughter of a devdasi brought up in Kamathipura, a red light area in Mumbai, Shweta had proved herself good in academics and was keen to pursue studies, so that she would not be condemned to the life her mother had led. After pursuing her initial studies in a municipal school, where she was aided in her studies by the Apna Aap group, which works in the Kamathipura area, she went on to studying in a private school, where this support group put her on to the NGO Kranti, which helped her in pursuing her dream of a good education, by sending her to the US, to study psychology, at 18.

While struggling against odds to pursue your goals that would help you better your lot and probably that of others close to you is one way of beating the odds stacked against you, another way to tackle this social imbalance is by thinking differently and equipping womanhood with the means to ward off the threats they face and the insecurity they experience, merely as a consequence of them being women. The primary discomfort that women usually feel in public places, which often holds them back, is being physically vulnerable and though teaching self defence to every woman is truly the way out, it has its own limitations and not merely the experience of physical threat, but the legal process of dealing with it can leave a woman scarred for life – a fact that keeps many away from doing what they please or are capable of. Offering an out of the box solution to this issue is Manisha Mohan, a 22 year old Engineering student, who with help from her friends, is in the process of putting final touches to (SHE) Society Harnessing Equipment, an electric bra, that can keep molesters and rapists at bay, by generating a 3,800 kilo-volts, that can prove to be very severe, thus proving once again that women are best aware of the threats they experience and should invest their time, energies and resources in coming up with innovative solutions for dealing with them, that would help not merely themselves, but other women as well.

Based on the self confidence that they feel, it is time that women increasingly learn self reliance, rather than sitting in hope of a better tomorrow, as it is against the vested interest of a section of the populace to let it happen, a section that is often the decision maker and policy setter or one that does not hesitate in hiding behind the facade of so called traditions, for their own benefit. For, if women are to rely on this happening, they would, most likely, have to wait forever. In order to protect their self respect, by drawing upon their self confidence, they need to take matters into their own hands, an action that is not as difficult as it appears. Most often women are bogged down by the feeling, also ingrained in them through the social order, that I am only a woman and only one at that, what can I do to challenge a system that is so long standing and deeply entrenched. The answer is simple enough, as can be evidenced from the story of Parwati Devi from Patna, who fought long, against her husband and in laws, to build a toilet in her home, an act that was revolutionary considering that such a stand had never been taken before and given that there was a great resistance to it, citing reasons that were diverse and unending. Taking her resistance to a totally different level, Parwati Devi fought long and hard for four years, taking on various issues like a closed mindset, to the extent of even separating from her husband and his family, only to get her way in the end. This resolved, not surprisingly, not merely the issue of hygiene, but indirectly also reduced that of crimes against women, which as statistics show, increases as women go out to relieve themselves in the open and sometimes even in the dark. Moreover, having a toilet at home also has a positive effect on women's health, as many a times they wait, suppressing their urge to relieve themselves, till darkness fades, in order to reduce the threat to their security.

Considering that the feeling of insecurity and its manifestation in crime against women is a primary issue (and one that has been reiterated often in this paper), women also need to draw upon this self reliance, to more proactively protect themselves and other women, as men are more often prone to gazing than action, which apart from being an integral aspect of their nature and our culture is further fuelled by an inefficient legal system that fosters indifference and an unrealised but latent bonding among men, who often believe that women bring it upon themselves. Essentially, it is important to realise that one does not need any great power or skill to protest

or resist, other than the awareness that you are capable and need to protest, as is more than sufficiently illustrated by the determination shown by Sunitha Krishnan. A victim of gang rape at the age of 15, she gathered together the threads of her life by teaching slum children, investing her energies in doing good for others, rather than focussing on her own trauma. In 1996, she set up an anti-trafficking organisation - Prajwala, along with her brother, which she heads. This organisation aids in the rehabilitation of sex workers and their children and those rescued from the sex trade, as women are often forced into it and then become victims of a lot more than just trauma – hazardous health conditions, including HIV/AIDS. Recently, she kicked off the Shame the Rapist Campaign, using social media, to turn the tables on molesters and rapists, who insist on filming videos of their acts, and posting them on the social media, to ruin the victim or then using them to blackmail the victim. She has taken to effacing the faces and bodies of the victims, to conceal their identity and posting the videos on the social media, both in the hope that the perpetrators of the crime would be identified and brought to book and that they would be shamed and possibly ostracised, if their identity is made public. Denounced and attacked for this action, which is fairly revolutionary, the former by women, who feel that Sunitha too is being unfair to women, by making their shame public, which is a reaction that is fairly ridiculous, but expected in a conservative society, she still believes in what she is doing and is willing to brave all odds and stand her ground, in order to make a difference and bring about a much desired social change that denounces the victim of rape or molestation and lets the culprit go free or at least walk around with his head held high.

In contrast to the more confrontationist manifestation of self reliance is self actualization that of making the most of the natural skills that women are endowed with, instead of squandering them or shying away from them, as something that would type cast you. Given that women have a natural flair for and an inculcated habit of cooking, cleaning and mending, rather than perceiving them as shackles or chores, women need to bring these to bear upon drawing upon the system for their own benefit. One of the chief concerns that keeps women at home is household chores, which they need to tackle, the responsibilities that they have within the four walls of their house and a hesitance to step out into the world to earn a living, either due to the number of problems it raises or the belief that, due to their lack of education, they may not get an opportunity, to find a foothold in the labour market. What remains unsaid in this is that women primarily serve as unaccounted for labour, thereby remaining unpaid, while contributing majorly to hard work and undertaking of responsibilities and completion of tasks, in the house. It is therefore important that these skills become the basis of their enterprises and help them foray into the 'paying' labour market, as these can aid them in taking on something that they can easily do, with only the minimal of instructions and with no real training to speak of.

Kutumsakhi started in 1977 by 5 women, headed by Dr. Chandrakala Hate, is one such initiative, which has not only harnessed a niche talent, but also met the significant demand for home style food being available, as a support to working women, single men or even the old, who can face severe challenges, due to a lack of such a basic, but important facility. While meeting a need and demand of the society, it has also provided a source of livelihood for 150 women, helping them commercialise their innate skills, with 11 centres and a turnover of 2.5 crores today.

Another case in point is that of Chinni Swamy, who launched her initiative *Stree Shakti*, with one woman, at her own home in village Purkal, in Uttaranchal, drawing upon the flair women have for stitching, since it is a task expected of them, especially in smaller places, to teach them the little known craft of quilting. Empowering a team of 130 women, from 15 villages, and aiding their attempt at self actualization, the initiative helps women produce textile products, such as quilts, cushion covers, bags, stoles and other accessories, with their signature products being patchwork and applique quilts. *Stree Shakti* retails its products through their shop, at the women centre in Purkal, their online store and at exhibitions across the country. They also have retail partners in the US and the UK.

Being able to bring to bear their natural potential, in helping them generate an income for themselves and serving as a support to their family, is no doubt likely to go a long way, in enhancing their self respect and self confidence, giving them the capability of relying on themselves and a voice that would help them take decisions that they might not have otherwise been able to, thereby affecting the way they are treated by the society or what they are willing to suffer, because they cannot find a way out. While this assurance can no doubt lead to a basic feeling of contentment, it can also help women develop a sense of self fulfilment, creating in them the ability to take on challenges that might have otherwise bogged them down.

The equanimity of women that is often shaken can be more than adequately compensated, through these four parameters, and these can also help the women develop a grit that is needed not merely to tackle everyday issues, but more importantly the unexpected that can throw one completely off gear. A case in point is that of Arunima Sinha, who in spite of being a victim of social discrepancy that makes men believe that women are weak, rose back to fight the loss of her leg and dissuasion from all quarters, including that of her guide, who helped her climb Mount Everest, to scale its heights, serving to become a beacon of inspiration, strength and hope for many women, whose challenges, though equally pressing, may not seem as insurmountable as that of Arunima. Thrown out of the train, for daring to resist a robbery attempt, without any support from co passengers, she writhed in pain, lying on the tracks and fighting death, till she was admitted to the hospital, only to realise that she had lost one of her legs and the bones in the other were crushed. To prove to herself and others that this had altered nothing, she scaled the world's highest peak on Everest that stands at 8848 metres.

In fact, considering that a prime debilitating factor for women is an attempt to demoralise them, by instilling in them a fear or a belief that they are helpless and meant to be exploited and attacking that aspect of self worth that they have been most conditioned to treasure, i.e. their looks, this sense of self fulfilment can help women rise above all challenges and take on the world on their own terms. Society has always imprinted on the minds of women that their looks and colour are what gives them beauty and makes them desirable, in ways that are both subtle and open. Over and above the social approach to beautiful women, subtle and blatant advertising keeps hammering on beauty, as an essential aspect of womanhood. Very often, its absence becomes a dampening factor, in the context of self worth, and also leaves women susceptible to attacks and humiliation that target the destruction of this beauty, thus indirectly affecting their self image.

And while it need not be so, beauty or the lack of it has always been a factor that has kept women back and made them susceptible to the power of men. Being able to challenge this can not only be liberating for women, but can also serve as a point of inspiration for others to follow, on the one hand, and a factor that can serve a major blow to the power that men exert over women, on the other, as has been more than aptly illustrated by Laxmi, the winner of the International Woman of Courage Award, bestowed on her in the US.

An acid attack victim, Laxmi has not merely contributed to the Stop Acid Attacks Campaign, but has also set up the NGO Chanv, that serves as a rehabilitation centre for acid attack victims and is currently hosting the show Udaan for News X. Attacked in 2005, at the age of 16 by a 32 year old lover, whose proposal she rejected, she serves as a reminder both of the fact that physical disfigurement is not the end of the world and destroying a woman's beauty need not dampen her spirit as well as that even today women are easily prone to attacks, by people who claim they love them, if the lover's advances are spurned.

The stories of women's struggle may be varied, but they are nevertheless underlined by the same reality that even today women are discriminated against, in manners that are subtle or obvious, hurtful or demeaning, scarring the mind or the body or at times both; and it is important to remain aware of this reality, rather than letting it get submerged in the rare but mesmerising dazzle of success stories. For, even if we blink our eye, the temptation would be to rest on our laurels, without making the necessary efforts to either to spread or sustain this success and this would make women empowerment in India a fleetingly fulfilled hope, rather than a sustained and sustainable reality.

Give a person a fish and you feed the person for a day, teach a person to fish and you feed the person for a lifetime. An ancient proverb, ascribed to many sources, its meaning can never be more significant than in the case of equipping women to take charge of their own life, so that the development that that is now seen in India becomes more sustainable and, as mentioned earlier, does not topple over, being lop sided. The 5 'S' paradigm, encompassing self respect, self confidence, self reliance, self actualisation and self fulfilment, is my attempt to chart a roadmap that can help transform this need into an actuality, creating an awareness that this is not merely possible, but essential, for sustainability of the Indian march towards growth and progress.

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