



Effecting a paradigm shift in perceptions and ensuring gender equality demand concerted efforts by all stakeholders.

◆ ANJALI HAZARIKA, AUTHOR, *WALK THE TALK*

**GENDER
DIVERSITY**

Hand in hand

“When you leave for work every day, what do you leave behind? Your opinions? Your uniqueness? Your religion? Your political affiliation? Your native language? Your gender?” asked a powerful advertisement of PriceWaterhouseCoopers on a billboard in New York some time ago. When we go to work with our professional identities, do we leave our non-professional identities at home?

A workplace can only be diverse if the people who work there can be themselves, bringing their whole selves to the table, and being permitted to retain various components of their identity. More so in the case of women in management.

Reality is in large part shaped by how we view it; it is all a matter of perspective. Perspectives—or worldviews—are filters through which we understand our experiences and the world around us, both individually held and culturally shared. Worldviews influence our goals, decisions, motivations, relationships, and even everyday encounters. The gridlock of clashing perspectives halts creative solutions from being developed and

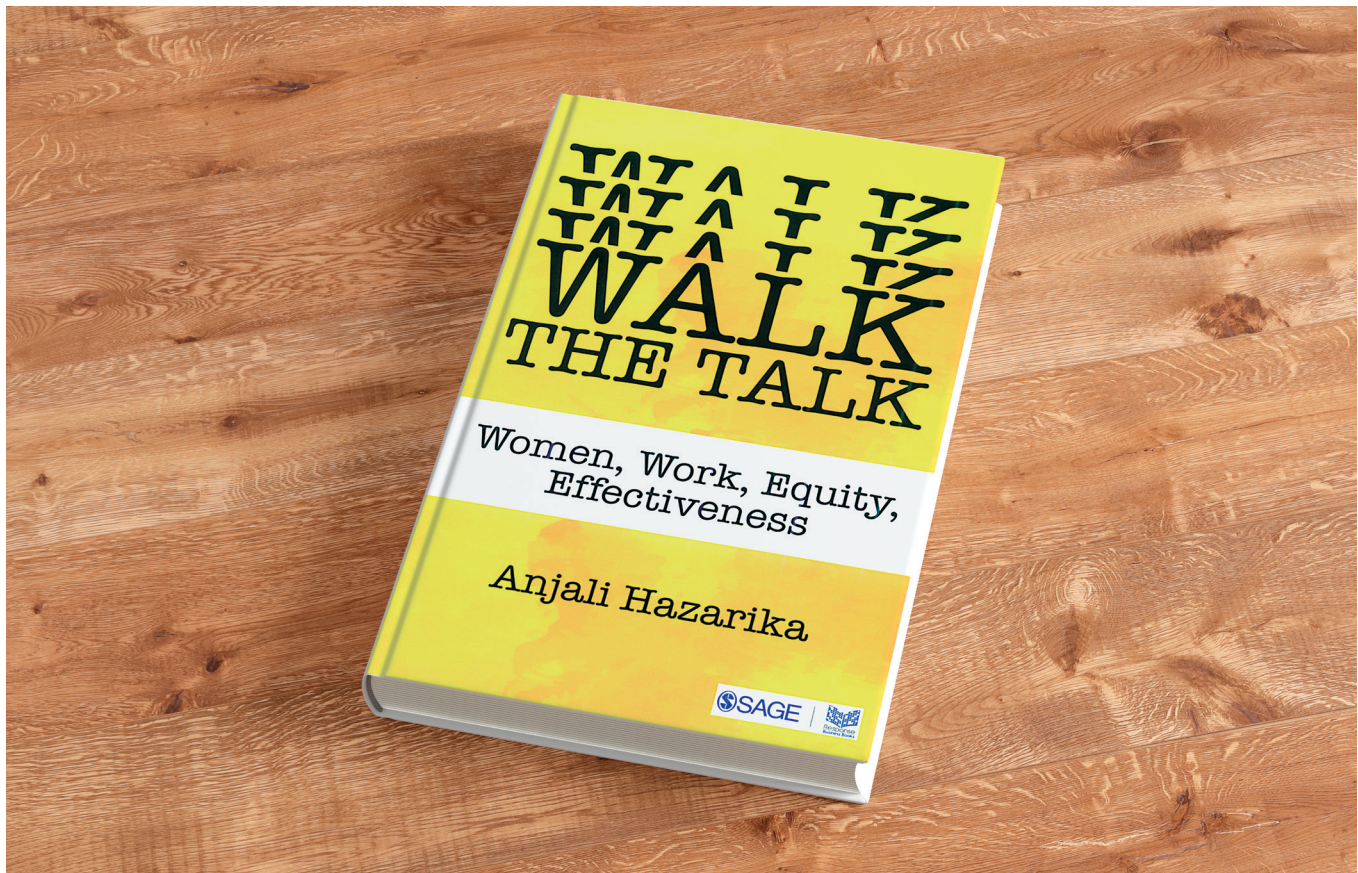
adopted in business. Diversity is not only the spice of life but increasingly also the source of business success.

How does this translate for women in the world of work which is still widely perceived as a male bastion?

Tip of the iceberg

Women’s equality is a complex issue characterised by vast contradictions. The problem is that despite a decade of aggressive efforts to create opportunities, inequity remains entrenched. For every woman achiever who makes headlines, there is a huge number of women languishing in the pipeline.

The past few years have seen a surge in the coverage and awareness of workplace discrimination and inequality as well as several paradoxical trends. While we have much to celebrate, we also have much to be concerned about. The growing recognition of women’s rights and gender equality is now juxtaposed with new and persisting forms of violence against them. Availability of new work opportunities coexist with weak bargaining power in the labour



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market. An increasing number of educated career women enter workplaces, while large sections of them remain illiterate and engaged in the low-paid informal sector.

Among graduates, only 34% are likely to take up formal work, of which only 25% represent corporate executives of which only 4-5% get to the board. At the same time, a small number of women—5.8%—became CEOs of S&P 500 companies in 2017, and presidents of universities, Members of Parliament, ministers, governors, and heads of states; but the proportion of senior roles held by them varies

enormously, by industry. Women tend to be over-represented in service industries such as education, healthcare, hospitality, and banking, while the leadership teams of more traditional industries such as manufacturing, transport, construction, real estate, mining, and petroleum are overwhelmingly comprised of men. Deep-rooted patriarchal mindsets continue to affect women, leaving them powerless and vulnerable. Only 22% of women are legislators. India slipped 21 places to 108 on the global index of gender gap in 2017. Women are grossly under-represented in parliaments, political parties, the corporate sector, business schools, healthcare, academia, and public services such as the police force and judiciary. The percentages quoted earlier are only the tip of the iceberg. There are

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many strong and unseen factors. The assumption of equality hides the reality of inequality.

It is a classic case of a glass half filled. How would you describe it? It depends on your

perspective. Those who see it as half full say that so many women have gained access to leadership. Those who see it as half empty say women are held back because many inequities still remain.

But to see real progress, we need business leaders to not stop at talking—even though they are saying the right things—but take action. They need to walk the talk.

My new book, *Walk The Talk: Women, Work, Equity, Effectiveness*, revolves around the core question: are competent women getting equal access to opportunities? To that end, what can companies do? What can governments do in terms of providing a policy environment? What can NGOs do to influence local communities and how women themselves are accountable? Considering there is no single or simple solution, all the stakeholders have a shared responsibility to make the environment as enabling as possible in reducing the gap between women and men as policymakers, corporate leaders, employees, entrepreneurs, suppliers, consumers, and community stakeholders.

Who can make a difference?

The answer is all of us, if half a billion women have to be part of India's growth story. It is noteworthy that achieving gender equality in India would have a larger economic impact than any other country in the world; it would translate to \$700 billion of added GDP in 2025. For this to happen, we need a critical mass of women in every sphere of life, which will require tackling significant gender gaps in society and driving a national agenda for change.

Let us take a look at the role each of the stakeholders can play in effecting this social change:

Role of governments

The gender pay gap—although many would deny its existence—reflects the fact that there is a gap between belief and actual practice. At the national level, annual reports of companies show that women directors at 30 Sensex companies are paid 46% less than men.

A trendsetter in this respect has been Iceland, where it is illegal to pay women less than men; the law was enforced as recently as January 2018.

The Companies Act of 2013 mandated that a certain class of companies should have at least one woman director on the board. As a result, out of 1723 NSE listed companies 1667 companies had met this mandate. That is a welcome change. However, we must ensure the intake of competent women at every level, not just in boards.



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Research indicates that more women in line roles is closely linked to enhanced financial performance.

In 2015, the Government of India launched the MUDRA scheme to promote finance to small businesses and micro-enterprises. This has helped women entrepreneurs access unsecured credit.

Efforts must be made to lower barriers to job creation, create infrastructure support for child care and elder care, and expand skills training arenas for women in key sectors.

Role of the corporate sector

To promote gender diversity, private and public sector companies need to review their human resources policies and practices. These include fair hiring practices, a commitment to equal wages for equal work, setting clear rules and criteria for promotions, and elimination of gender bias in performance reviews.

In order to reduce the pay gap, 'gender' needs

to be excluded while fixing compensation packages. It has to be based purely on the competencies required for a particular role. Gender pay parity policy needs to be introduced in order to encourage job role comparison. Often, it is seen that women are not promoted as much as men, and hence they lose out on huge increments. Also, they make only a few career moves and hence miss out on the average 25-30% jump in pay a career move would bring.

Women are poorly represented in revenue-generating line roles too. Research indicates that more women in line roles is closely linked to enhanced financial performance. It is important to send a message that all employees are treated equally so that they are motivated to contribute their best to the job.

Further, organisations need to create an enabling environment by providing flexible policies and practices to enable women to address the 3Ms in their lives—marriage, maternity, and motherhood. Companies such as



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IBM, Johnson & Johnson, and SHELL have done this and so also Indian companies such as ICICI, WIPRO, TCS, and Mahindra Group.

Role of NGOs

NGOs can play an important role in changing attitudes towards the role of women at work and in society. The government, NGOs, and private sector agencies could jointly promote CSR-led projects to promote education and awareness in communities, not just among women but men too. A major challenge in ensuring equality for the girl child is getting

men to be sensitive to gender equality and its benefits. It is important to recognise that men, as key players, have to be engaged to ensure gender parity.

In fact, the corporate world would do well to invite community participation through

NGOs to set up dependent care services such as crèches for infants and childcare/daycare centres and elder care programmes.

It is also important to help children adopt gender egalitarian values before they reach adolescence when their opinions start taking concrete shape.

Role of media

Gender sensitisation and non-discrimination in the portrayal of women in all forms of media and use of gender-sensitive language have to be advocated to ensure that women are not represented in a demeaning manner. Media campaigns creating awareness on gender equality have to be encouraged.

Role of women and men

Women must continuously learn and upgrade their skills to stay relevant. They have to be also

supportive of their female peers and mentor those who newly join the workplace. Beyond their personal lives, women can also act as influencers and change makers, and influence employers and governments. Social media is a powerful means to make their voice heard.

New-age parents need to groom their children well; they are not going to be respected unless they learn to be respectful. Young boys and girls need to be trained in home-making just as in career-making, at the appropriate time.

Role of civil society

Underlying social attitudes are arguably the biggest barrier vis-à-vis gender equality. It is paradoxical that most workplaces reflect 21st century challenges but societal expectations still belong to the 20th century. This creates tremendous stress for working women. It is not only enough to educate women, they need to be offered opportunities too. That is why traditional perceptions of masculinity and gender roles need to be redefined.

Maintaining work-life balance is a major challenge for women. The conviction that women are primary caregivers of the family needs to be changed, and men wanting to play active roles in their children's upbringing should not be stigmatised too.

Need for a multi-sectoral solution

It can be seen that gender inequality in society has an adverse impact on gender inequality at work. Also, gender diversity is correlated to higher productivity and creativity, and value creation. As mentioned earlier, there is no simple or single solution as there is no single path to equality; equality in itself is a path. It is a complex transformational journey with multiple stakeholders who must work together to create an empowered society. Enhancing collaboration among the stakeholders can create an ecosystem which is good not only for the economy but society at large. **IM**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anjali Hazarika is co-founder and President, Forum for Women in Public Sector; Associate Coach, Center For Creative Leadership (CCL) for Asia-Pacific region, and an author.