

Championing the Women's Cause

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The International Women's Day (IWD) has been observed since the early 1900's, after the world witnessed the rise of radical ideologies. While the world has seen a significant attitudinal shift in society's thoughts about women's equality and emancipation, sadly, even today the huge potential of women mostly remains untapped.

With more women entering the workforce as well as the boardroom, and, an increased visibility as impressive role models in every aspect of life, one may be led to believe that women have gained true equality. But, the sad fact is that women are still not paid equally, they are still are not present in equal numbers in business, and globally, education, health and violence against women is worse than that of men.

We certainly have made tremendous progress, but there is still a long way ahead to undo centuries of oppression. And so each year, the world inspires women and celebrates their achievements. But, there is an increasing realization that the day is not just about celebration, but, it also marks a call for action for accelerating gender parity. Many organizations, after taking stock of the progress they have made, declare an annual IWD theme that supports their agenda.

Recognizing the role of Men in Gender Initiatives

While the campaign about women emancipation continues, as a

process to salvage the damage of oppression there is a part of the equality narrative that does not receive enough attention: the prodigious role that men have played in getting us to a more equitable society, not only as our partners, but as leaders in their own right. Men who champion women's rights are the ones who complete the picture. With many existing societies and most of the workforce still being dominated by men, their role is a particularly powerful lever for change.

But being the change requires courage, stepping out of the widely accepted definitions of masculinity - which can come at a high personal risk to one's reputation. Men have to be willing to take these risks to generate system changing solutions to pressing gender equality issues.

Overcoming the Unconscious bias

While women have travelled the distance, and made great strides, they still face barriers to success in the corporate world very often due to our own unconscious biases. Very often well-meaning people, including believers of gender equality, are the ones who hold biases that stem women back. A bigger problem is that people who believe in equal rights are the very ones who make decisions that unintentionally transmit sexism.

What can be done?

- Build a sense of belonging -

Inclusion happens when you value both the differences and the similarities of others.

- Make dialogue a springboard for cultural change - Get people talking, and capitalize on the dialogue by formalizing a structure. Then move towards a commitment to change.
- Be an intentional leader - These are leaders who deliberately choose to be at the forefront of change and inspire others.

Take a Pledge

Encouraging women from all walks of life to come up and build a corporate career seems like an insurmountable challenge, but every journey begins with a first step. The momentum builds up and the first step is the hardest to take but it is high time now.

Corporate firms need to build work environments which focus on fostering a diverse and inclusive culture and not just provide lip-service. It's about raising awareness about ideas that will drive the next generation of women leaders. Employees need to be the custodians of women's advancement and all it needs is a commitment - a pledge for parity. **HC**

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