

Women make a difference

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My wife often makes reference to “your (my) harem” in CII and I thought of writing about this army CII of women in my working life. Especially after doing the concluding remarks at the Yale – CII seminar on Womens Leadership with Shabana Aazmi, Rohini Nilekani, Margaret Warner, Indra Nooyi and Naina Lal Kidwai – Social activist, NGO leaders, media person, global CEO and Indian CEO respectively. Of course, I have had strong teachers at home both wife and daughter.

As I listened to each of these truly outstanding women, the challenge was to add value at the closing. It seemed just right to refer to one’s own experience and to the fact that, in CII, women executives and professionals were large in number, that they showed amazing ability and competence, and that they were excellent in whatever they did so, I am on record, many times, saying that women were better than men in a service organization like CII.

Let me share some real – life examples with real names Manashi Roy, Kiran Pasricha and Supriya Banerji long time employers and now Deputy Director Generals, Ratika Jain, head of UK; Neerja Bhatia, head of South East Asia in Singapore ; Indrani Kar, head of Food and Agriculture; Shefali Chaturvedi, head of Social Development; Rekha Sethi, head of Events; Sarita Nagpal, head of Manufacturing; Shipra Tripathi – head of Africa; Harshit Sehgal – head of East Asia; Kavita Kohli, Head of Europe, Sandhya Satwadi, head of CII Western Region, Greta Varghese, head of Karnataka and many many more women have led key activities of, and in, CII.

The key is to give each one opportunity, space and trust. And, they will perform. While there has been an occasional sense of concern about someone being self- centered or not reaching out, the majority, in fact, almost all, have excelled in their areas of work and have been without personal egos, highly committed, strong on integrity, deeply loyal to the institution and straightforward (no politics !)

Indian women, as I said at the Yale – CII Seminar, are far more evolved than Indian men. They go through of more pain, struggle and a variety of experiences which help them to internalize leaving and achieve self – growth. Men, on the other hand, are born with the sun shining on them and cruise through. Indian social norms, in fact, operate to double standards. Males have few if any rules to follow. Women, on the other hand, are strictly disciplined and have to decide by unreasonable expectations.

This is clear when one sees the women in CII. Each one is of course different from other, but if you hold your hand to them, the response is 200% may have faced personal pain and struggle and it has been a special privilege to be trusted with their personal concerns and cares. This has only deepened the mutual bond and enhanced their level of motivation. The institution has benefited enormously.

In the corporate world, there are still many male – dominated organizations. I worry for them. They are missing out on something very special – the quality that an Indian women can bring, the sensitivity, the emotion, the spirit, the warmth. The sooner that Indian organizations open their doors to women the better for them.

CII, certainly, has benefited enormously from the women – my “harem” – and, by and large, they have become friends and daughters. I say “daughters” because, sometimes, I sense that attitude in the way they perceive me. They excuse me for my mistakes and yet are forthright – as only daughters can be – in communicating their views. Manashi Roy, Supriya Banerji and Kiran Pasricha have been the most forthright in their disagreements with me and have earned my respect.

This is another issue. The Indian male is often not able to “take” a strong Indian women in their stride. Be it limited vision or personal insecurity or indelicacy, the man seems to expect blind obedience rather than independent views. This is just not on especially since the women has much to say and contributes. Indian men have to change their mindset, learn to introspect and this will help them to evolve. Today, it must be tough for a capable Indian women to find an Indian man to marry who she can truly respect, befriend and love. It’s a challenge. The man, on the other hand, could be very limited and narrow in the expectations of the woman, leading to mutual disappointment.

My “harem” have taught me much. To listen. To understand. To communicate. To respect. To appreciate sentiment. To care. And, so much else. I feel sorry for the men who have missed out on all of this. They should try it sometime – to be a little different from the “usual” Indian male. I have certainly benefited enormously and all this does not come through overnight. It’s a process. Daily learning. And, especially, learning to say “sorry” when a mistake is made.

This is not to say that men are not capable or committed. They can be. They are. And, they are human so they are not to be taken for granted. But the man/woman combine is an unbeatable force. And, the women who build families and sustain them as an institution, it is because the women in CII helped make it so.

Did it happen by design or accident? Probably, accident? Probably, coincidence. But, it happened. Whether it stays that way, only the future will tell. But, suffice it to say that institution – building comes naturally to women – Indian women, certainly.