

BUILDING THE STRENGTH OF OUR SOCIETY

By Roli Mahajan

I had just finished my first year in college when I got an internship with a news agency. That one month was a learning experience. I went to the national capital Delhi, where I lived with an aunt who liked to see me home by 7 pm as she was responsible for my safety.

I was about 19 years old and was stepping into the world of ‘older people’. The corporate office was everything that I expected it to be and more. It was a newsroom to the core. It was also the place where I learnt something, which I should have questioned rather than accepting as a norm. During our editorial meeting, when people would give their inputs, I was often ignored. Once I was actually told by a colleague, ‘you are too young to state such opinions. As you don’t know much, why don’t you let me lead.’ Yet, I still remember what I had suggested was common sense.

A little more than 10 years down the line, I now realise that I should never have taken their comments about my being ‘young’ so casually. No input in any scenario can be considered stupid and young people need to learn but this cannot take place unless they are treated with dignity and respect. The world can’t speak about the benefits of the demographic dividend that nations could reap on one hand and yet allow organizations to belittle young people on the other. If all ‘old people’ start questioning all economic activity or for that matter any activity that a young person does and then cross-checking the same, we are creating a never-ending loop of feedback which at some point will stop yielding efficient results both, for the team and the individuals. Institutions have to start trusting the youth.

I felt so strongly about this that I have spent a large part of my early-twenties advocating for youth rights. But the fight is still not over.

Young people hold the key to the future, and tokenistic representations are not going to be enough. The fact that governments and organizations alike have started investing more heavily in youth development gives me hope. Mentoring young people is important, however micro-managing or breaking their spirits is detrimental. Mindsets might take some time to change but at least the process of change has begun when it comes to youth. The appointment of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth is a point to the case as it pushes nations to acknowledge young people for the role they play in the economic, social and political aspects of governance.

However, my account which spans a decade will touch upon mindsets and the need for them to evolve, some more.

So, going back to my story, I didn't realise it then but safety as an issue was going to become omnipresent in my life, if it wasn't already so. I moved back to my hometown at the end of my internship but not without convincing the management that I deserved a chance and that maybe I could work on a part-time basis, once I was home. I couldn't believe it when they agreed. I really wanted to perform well, so I decided that I would do whatever I could to balance my act and manage my second year at college as well as this job. What I didn't take into account then were social norms in the form of 'what would others say' and 'safety'.

To top it all, my lady boss in Lucknow was not happy on being asked to include a 'young girl' in her team. She would not give me assignments and I would end up sitting in the office for three or four hours twiddling my thumbs. When I approached her asking for work, she ended up lining three assignments for me which meant that I was to reach home after 8 in the night on three consecutive days. It never occurred to me that this would create havoc at my place.

On the second day, I found my grandmother standing near our main gate. She didn't speak a word but on reaching her room I realized that a war ground was being prepared and I was the much awaited opponent. My parents pounced on me. They said that a job which kept me out till 7 or 8 in the night was not a decent job. Also, what would others say when they got to know that I was working, because it would mean that my parents couldn't afford my education. I just didn't understand all the rationales that were presented to me, but I could see that their minds were set. The next couple of days (or was it weeks) were exceptionally tough. The lady boss had set her

mind against taking on a girl as a correspondent while my parents had set theirs against their daughter working.

I quit for the greater good but somethings that became clear to me were: if I ever became a parent then I would encourage my daughter to work and if I would ever become a boss, I would mentor a young person and specially a girl, such that they could break the restraints that society has created over a period of time.

What I didn't realise then was that if I ever wanted to work, social constraints and safety would always wreak my plans. In 2009, when I got a job at a publishing house in Delhi, I was overjoyed. Jobs, which paid well and were ready to absorb fresh graduates, were like an oasis in a desert. Often a mirage and very rare. So much so that the situation is no different today.

According to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)¹, the Indian economy may be growing more than twice as fast as the rest of the world but the story on job creation and employment fronts is grim. Over 30% of youths aged 15-29 in India are not in employment, education or training (NEETs), which is more than double the OECD average and almost three times the rate in China.

I am sure the numbers might have varied a little in 2009 but even if I would have quoted those to my parents, they would not have heard my case. I had been educated in the best of the schools, then encouraged to choose subjects that I liked during my graduate years and also, counselled to do a Master's viz-a-viz breaking the flow of my studies for a drop year, only to be asked to sit at home to wait for a few years to fulfil my ultimate goal in life: 'MARRIAGE'. I could not believe that my educated and loving parents had become strangers, overnight.

The realization that they were manacled by the Indian social norms and gender-biased mindset was not a consolation. I wanted to be an independent girl who could earn her keep and travel. I didn't give up. After all Rome wasn't built in a day. I used tears, arguments, tantrums, tact and almost everything that I could to convince them. But they were adamant that I should not move out of Lucknow.

¹ OECD ECONOMIC SURVEYS: INDIA © OECD 2017
<http://www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/INDIA-2017-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

It is said that when all doors close then the one that you didn't notice opens up, you just have to be consistent and look around. My resistance continued for 3 weeks and then I realized that there was one member of my family who was not as neutral to this struggle as I might have realized. My grandmother, who I thought would be of no help, decided to extend a hand of sisterhood. And sisterhood it was. She said, "When I tried setting up a business all the men in this house had obstructed my path. What is wrong if a girl wants to work? A girl needs to be independent and earning an honest living helps this cause. You get your tickets."

I think my grandmother was ready to put my well-being over social norms and structures. She could sense the gender-constraints that would curtail my aspirations and for once decided to support her kind rather than follow the conventional gender-biased mindset of my newswire-lady-boss.

Her one positive step, helped me move away from becoming a part of the dismal unemployment statistic. It also helped me not become a part of the u-shaped curve on an economist's notebook. A 'U-shaped' curve is used to understand women's labour-force participation rates around the world as it is high for countries with very low or very high levels of development, and low for countries at middling levels of development. Considering that India has one of the lowest female labour-force participation rates in the world², I was lucky.

Since then I have often tried to analyze how can more Indian women work and what are the steps that the world around me is taking to make an equal world possible. Here I will quote Peter Drucker as I have tried to "just look out of the window and see what's visible but not yet visible."

Safety is a strong and genuine concern. Big organizations have tried to tackle this concern by offering pick and drop services, flexibility in terms of hours and location as well as counselling support (in some cases) in case women workers need to raise any concerns. However, these are actions but not strategies for tackling the root cause(s): social norms and other gender-specific constraints.

² ILO report: Women at Work (2016)
http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_457317.pdf

Innovative solutions like the internet platform “Safecity” have been ambitious. Here technology has come to rescue. A non-profit initiative, this platform uses Open Source technology to document personal experiences of sexual harassment and abuse in public spaces. This data can be used to make big shifts.

Like when young female students in a suburb of Delhi (Dwarka) showed the Delhi Metro Authority officials the data and demanded that more policemen be on patrol in the evenings, so that women and girls might move around safely in that area. The authorities were happy to act on the evidence.

This for me exemplifies how collective action can move stagnant structures. It also emphasizes that as structures are made of and by people, some parts of these might be more agile than others. Moving beyond the obvious, we have to motivate these ‘not so neutral parts’ of the structures (bureaucracies, family members, management) to help bring monumental shifts.

However, I also firmly support that organizations should be about functions and not structures. Structures are important because they can be used to support people who contribute towards efficient functioning. These structures are built on economic, social and spiritual foundations, thence they need to give as well as receive the same.

The rebel in me enjoys the fact that efficient functioning can also challenge structures. So, if I know that two candidates with the same skillset and experience have applied for the same job, yet the man was selected only because the woman was recently married or of the ‘right age’ (to be married) then I know that this organization will never challenge or innovate. This organization will always look at short-term benefits and thence, remain mediocre.

My decade long experience of working as a professional and volunteer has taught me, that the moment things become comfortable nothing grows in that space. And I want to grow. Just like I want to see my society grow. This will never happen until women start working and women won’t work until organizations push their boundaries and concentrate on functioning.

In the end, C.V. Raman’s words come to my mind. The Nobel Prize winning Indian physicist once said, "The true wealth of a nation consists not in the stored-up gold but in the intellectual

and physical strength of its people." So, let us build the wealth of our society, by changing mindsets and getting women to move out of their houses.