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Women Empowerment in India

5 When I was younger, I lived across a garment primary school where my housekeeper's daughter Nandhini used to study. Every evening after school Nandhini would come home to finish her homework, while waiting for her mother to finish work. Curious one day, I asked her what she was working on. She said she was helping a tenth grader finish his homework. Nandhini was only
10 in seventh grade at that time. I can assure you today with two master's degrees I probably still won't be able to solve that algorithm Nandhini was working on. Not without the help of Google.

A few years past I was prepping to leave to Australia to further my education while Nandhini was prepping to get married. I protested to her mother. My mother offered to fund for her college
15 education, but I was perplexed to learn that this decision was taken by Nandhini and her parents. She was confident that she did not have the skills to get her through college. Her parents preyed on the fear and proposed the solution, marriage. They convinced her that marriage is the solution to all of her problems and her reason for existence.

20 It was 2016 I just returned from Australia and started SpaceBasic, a company focused on optimizing communication and collaboration within universities and student housing. A few months into starting SpaceBasic, I met Nandhini again. I quickly learned that this girl who loved solving problems for math for 10th graders was married with two children and working at a clothing store at 19. I felt a deep sense of disappointment and anger. This is when I realized, there
25 is a problem. There is a problem only our generation can solve. How will we contribute to growth when we can't achieve or create equal opportunities?

Gender inequality is not only a pressing moral and social issue, but it is critical to economic challenge. Over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from having the same jobs as men.
30 Globally, countries are losing over a hundred and sixty trillion dollars in wealth, because of the difference in earnings between men and women. It's great that the government of India has created initiatives to promote skill development, so that women can be a part of the workforce, but I personally believe that apart from technical skills what women surely need are the skills that will help them build confidence in self-morale.

35 In fact, it wasn't just Nandhini suffering from self-confidence. I remember sitting in this exact same auditorium in 2012 attending a campus recruitment session. I was thinking to myself what am I going to do with my life? I had no grades to be recruited by the companies neither did I have the skills they were looking for. My male peers, however, laughed it off, knowing they would figure it
40 out. I couldn't help but think where did they get this confidence from? Are they born with it or are they brought up with it? Looking back, the only reason why I could progress in my career is because I had access to real world opportunities that helped me identify my skills and strengths. This did not necessarily include textbook education.

45 It's amazing to see year after year more girls and women are enrolling into schools and colleges. Girls are more successful than boys and clearing classes and exams. This trend has been consistent for over seven years what's alarming, however, is that more girls are studying but nearly 84% of them drop out before graduating. More women are going to college, but fewer are working. Today as we speak 250 million more Indian women could be employed, but are not.

50 So, when you think about it what is the reason for this discrimination? In a country with strong traditional influences embarked on us from a young age we often fail to question the concept of prejudice. A relatively rigid structure that has been imposed on us from such a young age. We women come with the blueprint of being caretakers well as men are considered to be decision
55 makers or providers. Most women urban and rural are brought up with the preconceived notion that education is the stepping stone towards finding a good husband. Apparently, the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Parents feel like they have fulfilled their duty by educating their daughters and what is left is marrying them off. Indian parents especially focus saving all their lives for their daughter's wedding rather than investing in her dreams and saving for her social growth.

60 Today when someone asks me who are you or describe yourself. I say to them that I'm an entrepreneur. This word to me has no gender. It simply means I like creating goals. I like achieving targets and I love waking up every morning with the mission to create impact. The only time I'm reminded of being a woman is when I am at home or at a social family gathering, where a man
65 asks with concern why am I 29 and not married? Pay attention, they do not ask me how my company is doing or if I'm even employed, but I most definitely get asked why am I not married. When we see this in our own communities and do nothing about it how can we influence women from low social economic backgrounds to have a voice? Besides these social norms, and other major factor contributing towards discrimination is to do with lack of access to real world skills and
70 role models. This is a problem women face globally, which contributes to them thinking they're not good enough or they're incapable of doing better. I read an article the other day that kind of caught my attention. This article stated that India is one of the top countries in female workforce participation. Now when I say top I mean backwards, we were ranked 121 out of 131 countries in female workforce participation. This article also read that nearly 50% of Indian women who find
75 employment quit in the first one to two years. Honestly, I wasn't personally surprised to learn that only 9% of startup founders and cofounders are women.

It is at this moment, we at SpaceBasic wire a platform consciously decided to create a talent pool of underrepresented students and provide them with opportunities without bias of
80 background or gender. Our goal has been only to empower students regardless across cities or villages. We want to provide them with equal opportunities because we believe students are the future of our country's growth. Guys let me tell you, this goal changed my life. I remember staring at an email last December for a few minutes. This was no ordinary email. This email was from the Government of India and the United Nations stating that I was recognized as 2018's top women
85 transforming India. With this acquired motivation, we went back to Nandhini's school last year and met with some other students and asked them what they aspire to be? Some said they want to be teachers, some said they want to be doctors, some wanted to learn to speak fluent English, while some had simpler dreams of going to college. When we asked them what can we do to help them achieve this? They looked at us puzzled and said how do we do this after school?

90 Gandhi said “educate a man and you educate a person educate a woman and you educate a family”. While education is the fundamental towards upliftment, I often question what is the status of women in India today since this quote seventy years ago? When you think about it, this is not a problem that only the government can solve.

95 Here's a question how many of our mothers are working? You will all agree with me when I say women are born with managerial DNA along with the DNA of primary caretakers. Here's how let's take our working mothers for example. They are dedicated to making sure that our home is in order. They are dedicated to making sure we are well nourished and well educated and they managed to do all of this beautifully while being employed. Their time management and their
100 multitasking skills are impeccable. Why not raise our generation with this seed of thought and help them recognize this trait in their DNA? My mother was one out of two women studying medicine in her entire medical college back in the 80s. My co-founder and mentor Indu, now a successful entrepreneur in the US, was one out of nine women studying engineering here in Bangalore. Indu had to fight to have a woman's restroom constructed in her college, because management did not
105 find the need to have this basic amenity. According to them, there were not enough women to consider building a restroom.

Today, you and I are able to question these fundamentals, because of such inspiring women around us. They have raised their voice and led the way for equal opportunities. We all, men and
110 women, have the power to make change and create impact in someone's life in much smaller ways than we think. This is Bonnie. She is Nandhini's sister. She's 14 and she loves animals and when she grows up, she wants to be a veterinarian. This time we aim to do everything in our power to make sure Bonnie achieves her dreams and goes out into the world and crushes it. Everyone here today knows a Nandhini amongst us. Let's go back home and start with talking to
115 our housekeepers and asking them what they or their children are doing? Perhaps this answer will change your life like it changed mine.

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