

EDGE 2020

EVENING 3

Thursday, 17th December, 2020
6:00 pm onwardsWHOSE VOICE
IS IT
ANYWAY?Building for the
gender narrative

India has been grappling with the task to uplift the status of women and their socio-economic independence for decades. Government schemes, coupled community-based interventions, has resulted in a few positive outcomes. However, the Pandemic, has severely disrupted this development. The lockdown and restrictions have put a pause to the degree of progress achieved over the years in the areas of economic prospects, freedom, right to livelihood, education and wellbeing. A majority of women and children are now more confined in crowded living places; the agency to make decisions is limited; mobility is severely restricted; and patriarchy and gender roles are adding to mental health concerns. These gaps will take several years to bridge, and collective interventions are the key to solve these concerns.

The following set of conversations is an attempt to understand the situation and interventions made by changemakers across sectors.

SEGMENT 1 – GROUND ZERO



Exploring the realities at the grassroots, **Uma Chatterjee, Co-Founder & Executive Director, Sanjog** was in conversation with **Supia Khatun, Survivor Leader, Utthan & ILFAT**.

Uma spun a powerful interaction with Supia about the work she has embarked on as a mission to stop human trafficking.

Supia is a 25-year-old survivor of trafficking; she is the now the Founding member of Utthan and ILFAT (India Leadership Forum Against Trafficking), two of the biggest collectives in India.

Supia's dream is to see a day when trafficking stops in the country, and nobody will be for sale.

She narrated that the state of survivors in society carries its challenges and biases. The ongoing Pandemic and the subsequent impact of the cyclone Amphan made survival difficult. The survivors and the community were already grappling with socio-economic restrictions and the proximity of their living situation gave rise to further abuse from family members and many a time from strangers.

The discussion focused on mental health concerns that the community was facing due to the restrictions on movement and being confined at home. This atmosphere made many relive their past trauma of their state as victims of trafficking. During the pandemic, Supia worked with the survivors who were dealing with the Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The lockdown simulated some of the earlier experiences for most, and their situation worsened due to cyclone Amphan. Throughout this challenging time, Supia managed to provide the survivors with counselling sessions and therapy.

Supia Khatun's support to the community:

- The organizations ILFAT and Utthan provided the survivors of cyclone Amphan support by filling applications on their behalf to gain government relief and aid.
- The organisations work with the government and they believe that unless the survivors don't work in partnership with NGO's or Government, we cannot put an end to the crime.
- Crowdfunded and provided mobile phones for the survivors, so that they could share their problems over the phone and on Zoom.

For more information on ILFAT click [here](#).

About Sanjog:

- Sanjog is a technical resource organisation which works with governments, civil society organisations and businesses, as well as individuals and collectives to combat violence against children and women.
- The executive team includes mid-career professionals who have a personal commitment to the causes of child protection, gender justice and social equity.

For more information on Sanjog click [here](#)

Uma is a clinical psychologist, psychosocial trainer, and researcher who works with Utthan and ILFAT on its mission to combat violence against children and women. She deftly conducted this conversation on a very sensitive issue that many survivors find difficulty in expressing their views.

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SEGMENT 2 – FRONTLINE FORWARD



Grassroots Leaders, **Kamlesh, Chairperson, Savera Mahila Manch** and **Khatija, Chairperson, Kranti Mahila Manch** spoke with **Aiswarya Ananthapadmanabhan, Chief Manager - Partnerships, EdelGive Foundation** on the interventions each organisation conducted with the community with regards to a simple and effective programme- the Grain Bank. Women empowerment focused NGO, *Ibtada*, helped women by directing the management of resources, and by creating kits that carried other emergency aid.

Aiswarya began the conversation by acknowledging the resilience of women and girls who stood up and stood together to address the challenges of their communities. The regions that they represent is Alwar, one of the most deprived regions in the Mewat region of Rajasthan. The region suffers extreme social and economic backwardness due to the lack of resources, awareness, education and health.

Khatija narrated her experience of building community support during the lockdown to help low-income groups in the region. The Collaboration was the key to increase net support to the needy. Early on, she noticed that loss of livelihood was making families go hungry and struggle to procure necessities. The community support system also included support from the men in the village.

- The federation consists of **80 villages, 365 self-help groups, 25 clusters** and **4,842 women**.
- The federations network spread across various villages at a very sensitive time to collect grains for the needy. While they faced initial criticism for their actions, with time, they were able to convince the villagers to contribute to this noble cause. There were occasions when they would only manage to receive **3 quintals** (300 kilograms) from one village alone.
- The federation eventually collected over **52 quintals** of grains (approximately 5200 kilograms) through their persistent efforts.
- Approximately **200 families** benefited from the exercise.

Intervention efforts by the two leaders:

- The Grain Bank initiative was an innovative idea that was in place before the Pandemic struck. The simple idea is to collect a handful of grains as donations from community members which helps low-income families.
- The groups also trained the community to maintaining safety measures during the Pandemic as per the guidelines.
- Both leaders dealt with criticism from the community. They chose to continue working with their plans and have seen sections of society benefit.
- There was method applied to distribute aid to the community seamlessly. The grains and aid were distributed based on the size of the family and for some who could not afford to mill the grains, they were provided with a milled option.

Ibtada –Alwar’s interventions:

- Ibtada has been working with villages and SHGs on girl’s education program through Taleemshala for many years. For the last three years, Ibtada is running a program with a focus on ensuring rights and entitlement in this village.
- In order to ensure that the needy were provided with food during the lockdown, a community-led grain bank initiative was started by Ibtada where the women leaders collected 14,983 kgs of grains.

For more information on Ibtada, click [here](#).

Kamlesh spoke about the activities undertaken by her organisation which consists of, **52 villages, 280 groups and with the support of 3,000 women within 21 clusters**.

During the lockdown, they were plagued with questions about the wellbeing of the low-income groups and also enabled the Grain bank initiative in collaboration with Ibtada. Ibtada made them understand that only grains as relief option wasn’t enough and they needed to include kits with other essentials for survival.

- **46 quintals of grains (4600 kilograms) was collected from 19 villages.**
- Over **200 low-income families** across villages gained from this initiative. The villages too realised and understood the power of women organisations.
- The group has also started extending the scope of the programme toward **providing access to livelihoods** by directing the community to various avenues of livelihood such as setting up shops, animal husbandry work, agriculture etc.

Aiswarya concluded the session by recapping the knowledge that women’s collectives also play a significant role in nurturing women’s leadership, participatory change, and promoting both social and economic inclusion. Ibtada’s work in nurturing these women as ‘adhikar sakhis’, mobilising them into Village rights committees’ has truly made leadership an ingrained part of the work that these women do for their communities.

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SEGMENT 3 – COLLECTIVE ACTION



Actor, Director & Social Advocate, Nandita Das and Anju Gupta, ADG, Uttar Pradesh Police joined Naghma Mulla, President & COO, EdelGive Foundation to examine the gender narrative in light of the pandemic.

Nandita spoke about the internal shifts in attitude and the kind of dialogue that was needed for bringing attention to the issues of violence. Anju spoke from the perspective of the government machinery that was in existence as per the law. And, an education in both kinds of information is what this discussion draws.

Nandita Das to showcase her short film, '[Listen to Her](#)', for the purpose of this discussion, she spoke extensively about the shadow pandemic- the rise in violence against women and girls under the restrictions of the lockdown due to COVID.

The film has roused several conversations from the audience since its release in May. Nandita points explicitly two observations:

- Women have suddenly been burdened with a lot more work. We need to realise that unpaid work is still work.
- There is an absence of men in the entire discussion of women empowerment. Men not being included in this discussion is the gap, and therefore they aren't in a position to participate adequately. This further also makes them blind to the fact that violence against women is not a women's issue, but in fact it is a human rights issue.

“Girls empowerment is very slow in India. Women from affluent classes, professional women who have faced abuse for years have suffered in silence. Why? Because they didn't want to talk about it, they didn't get the support they needed. Only by listening to them, we are not going to change their destiny. I think the internal discourse is most important. When we start debating and discussing something openly, that is when all these things will come out on the table, and people will discuss them.”

-Anju Gupta

“I think we still have a long way to go, so in every possible way we can keep talking about these issues, and that's why I wanted to call the film- 'Listen to Her'. We must speak up, of course, but it's easier said than done for women who are conditioned to keep quiet. There is such a culture of silence that until we don't begin to listen; people are not going to speak up, and this is true of every issue. More and more of us have to listen, so that more and more women can speak up.”

- Nandita Das

Anju Gupta patiently led the audience through the processes of the law and spoke passionately of its provisions and the need for an education on legal rights. She also linked this discussion with the necessity for women to have conversations on violence and the need for these discussions to grow deeper and more open.

- She believes what the country needs is to work with **empirical data** versus anecdotal evidence.
- Indian laws with regards to crimes against women are one of the most stringent in the world.
- Anju shed light on how the law and its processes needed to be viewed. The system is robust and offers solutions like the domestic abuse helplines, which are one such way to access the support system, both during the pandemic and otherwise.
- There are no Band-Aid solutions in the legal system, but a robust process.

Naghma concluded the session by highlighting what Nandita did brilliantly, as an artist- she had used her craft to influence and bring attention to an issue concealed in the fabric of society. Anju Gupta, was from within the system, who also consciously and consistently highlighted the provisions and relevance of the law enforcement system. She left us with the thought - **our responsibilities as individuals is, no matter where we are seated, we first must become aware of the system and ensure there is more discussion.**

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SEGMENT 4 – REBUILDING TOGETHER



Leading journalist and woman entrepreneur, Faye D'Souza led an enlightening discussion with three speakers from distinct fields - **Anita Dongre, Designer & Founder, House of Anita Dongre, M Hari Menon, Country Director, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** and **Soumya Rajan, Founder & CEO, Waterfield Advisors**. The discussion circled around the issues women face as entrepreneurs in India, which is already grappling with the dismal numbers of their participation in the public sector domain. Using their observations from their field of work, the speakers dwelled on resolutions for this population - financial literacy, social upliftment, and inclusion by policymakers were some of the main findings.

Faye began the conversation by giving us some facts to think about. **17% of the GDP** is the economic contribution of women in India. Majority of women work in the informal sector, which means a lack of protection. Women are not even half the population equal in India due to sex-selective abortion. Representation in Parliament is low at a mere **11%**. In the entrepreneurship space, only **14%** are women.

Anita Dongre led the discussion by stating that her gender was never a concern when she chose to become an entrepreneur. She recollects that it was the power dynamics that men held in society that drove her to become economically independent.

- Her determination led her to overcome gender biases. She believes she may be a catalyst for many young girls in the rural sector who also have an intense hunger to succeed.
- She recommends working with numbers as the important pillar for any entrepreneur. Not to be afraid to ask.

Sowmya Rajan detailed out her journey from working in the banking sector for 25 years and then switching to an entrepreneurial role. It was a difficult switch as she cautions it was a difficult journey.

- The flip side is that one does not have the financial resources
- Most people jump into entrepreneurship without knowing what it entails - the ability to create an impact, ability to have purpose is very meaningful in terms of a career choice.
- The significant hindrance is access to capital and access to credit, particularly for women.
- Financial literacy is the bigger issue that needs to be tackled.

Hari Menon raised concerns of the status of women during the pandemic and reiterated:

- Emphasis should now be on getting women in positions where they have more access to resources, income assets, making sure that they know, they have the opportunity to control how these resources are deployed and then to benefit from the economic gains and then giving them the agency which is really about decision-making and empowerment that helps improve outcomes for families and society.
- Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) during COVID have demonstrated stories of resilience. These SHG movements have made us understand how women's economic empowerment is possible. They have managed to create small micro nano enterprises which have the potential to generate millions of jobs.

"It has been pointed out in the past that equal is not just better, equal is excellent! Until we have an equal number of women and trans people in rooms where decisions are being taken - whether those are boardrooms, whether they are parliaments, state assemblies, banks or their households - we have to have more women in rooms, where decisions are being made, and that's how these decisions then empower women. They create systems that are more equitable and more sensitive, thereby empowering women within their households, to take care of both family and their respective careers."

- Faye D'Souza

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Special Segment: My Philanthropic Journey



The evening reached its finale with a profound conversation between two of India's most prominent women philanthropists, **Rohini Nilekani, Founder-Chairperson, Arghyam** and **Vidya Shah, Chairperson and CEO, EdelGive Foundation**. This profound conversation covered the spectrum of Rohini's philanthropic journey with adequate valuable advice for other philanthropists, especially those who are new to the idea of giving. The central focus of the conversation was the role that civil society can play by collaborating with the government and with other agencies to bring an impact. She believed that women's roles in philanthropy held importance, even if they were to begin in a small way; this had the potential to instil in the next generation the ownership to improve their community.

Highlights of the conversation:

- Women can use their talents not only at their jobs and by managing their families but also to improve their communities.
- Philanthropies need to collaborate with Civil society organisations. These organisations have their feet firmly on the ground since they have been working at the grassroots for decades; they understand how problems evolve.
- We must see ourselves as citizens first and work to make the society better. Whether it's just one's house, neighbourhood and then the country. There has to be a flip from realizing that one is not just a subject, one is not a consumer; one is a citizen, a human being first.

"Rohini has said that the lockdown period has been the most fertile period to think about life, and the issues we are surrounded by. She is an unconventional and unusual thinker. She acts on her convictions, she is able to triangulate concepts and data in a highly lateral way, and I think her articulation of "Samaaj, Bazaar and Sarkaar" and societal platforms is a deceptively simple way of frame-working an approach, a way of thinking, and most hopefully, of solving the problems that plague humanity today."

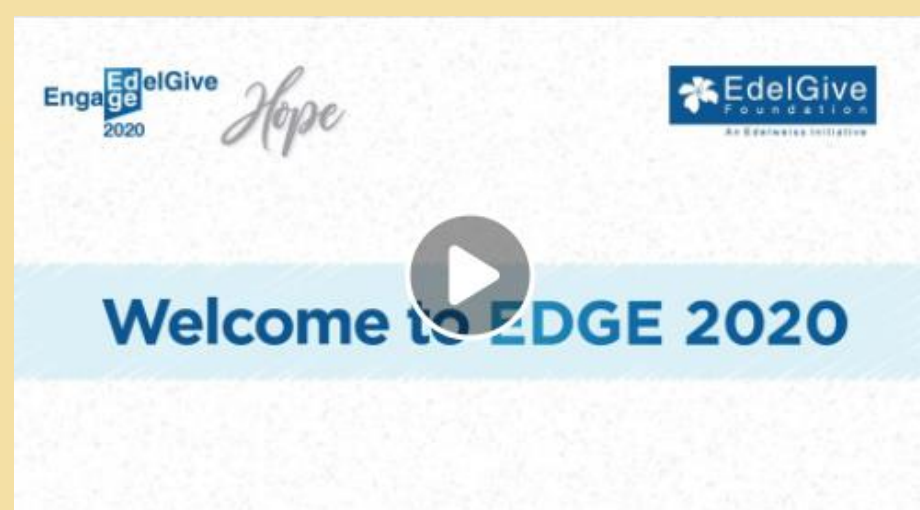
– Vidya Shah

"The task before civil society, the media and all of us who care about such issues is to make people see that the whole idea of "business of business is business" is over. We understand the inter-connections so much better, especially in 2020, that I think it is time for more businesses and wealthy people to start giving forward into areas where they directly don't get benefit from. It is a very critical way forward, even from themselves as we know the kind of satisfaction, joy and discovery we get from doing this work. It is also up to us to tell these stories a little better than we are doing right now to draw in more people into this adventure."

– Rohini Nilekani

- For society, wealth creation is a good thing because that's how you bring more and more people into prosperity; which is why societies allow it, which is why the state encourages it and that wealth must be used and must be seen to be beneficial for society not a concentration with a few.
- We have to understand the interconnections much better, especially since the state of the world in 2020. More business organisations and wealthy people should start giving forward into areas that they will not directly get benefits from.
- Civil society organisations have to come, whether they like it or not into the digital age; because the new societal problems are going to be digital age problems.

Know more about [Arghyam](#) and [EkStep](#)



Thank you for joining the conversations at EDGE!

Evening 1 deliberations can be viewed [here](#)

Evening 2 deliberations can be viewed [here](#)

We will see you again next year!

If you missed Evening 3 you can watch it on the link above!

Please write to us at edge@edelweissfin.com for any concerns and feedback.