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MAR, 21

Youth Sensitization: an important aspect in combating gender barriers

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Youth is one of the most dynamic and important segments of our society. They are the change agents we need to create an equitable country. Over the years, I have been fortunate to interact with such vibrant, ambitious, and conscious young individuals, who understand the challenges before them and are ready to break the glass ceiling for themselves and others behind them.

As concerns over gender equality increase, the need to begin addressing them at a younger age will also increase. According to the 2019 Human Development Report, India was ranked 129th in gender equality out of the 189 countries that were assessed. Furthermore, in the gender gap index by World Economic Forum, India ranked 112th, lower than China, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Without the involvement, enablement, and support of the younger populations of our country, we will not be able to address the several issues underlying gender equality today.

We need to catch them young and keep them engaged for a longer period of their life on conversations related to gender and equality. Below are a few ways which we can collectively adopt to ensure the youth of our country are working towards an equitable India.

1. Start young:

The 10-19 adolescent age for young minds are critical periods of self-discovery. It is in this age that gender roles become more prominent, since a lot of the social conditioning begins at this stage. At home, in schools and colleges, and overall, in the community, more open conversations on equality are required at this age and even earlier.

2. Gender Responsive educational institutes:

It is necessary to create gender responsive schools in the country where the academic, social, and physical environment and its surrounding community consider the specific needs of children of all genders. In addition to that there needs to be gender sensitivity in classrooms where all genders should be encouraged equally to participate. While schools and educators can help in empowering the younger generation, it is important to understand the partnership between the school and parents. Strengthening this facet helps to identify gender issues at home as well.

3. The power of collectivization:

Today, more than ever, we need to invest our capacities in collectivizing the youth into groups and forums that actively participate in societal change. Collectivization of youth in community building enables them a direct understanding of on-ground realities. They need to know that they are not just propagators of change but even larger 'enablers' of change in their communities. This realization further creates a sensitivity to the issues they are addressing. Community youth volunteer networks are an untapped network, which has the potential to create real change.

4. Community Leadership:

Leadership for the youth can no longer be restricted to their positions in schools or colleges. They must evolve into 'community leadership' working closely with the government systems, civil society and business structures to advocate for equal rights. Only when we recognize them as part of the decision-making process, can we begin to collectively work through problems of gender equality. To this effect, incorporating entrepreneurial and life skill development is necessary for holistic growth of children. It enhances their critical thinking skills, imparts leadership, and prepares them for an uncertain future.

5. Promote an entrepreneurial mind-set:

Lastly, entrepreneurial learning programs are emerging as pathbreakers. It is therefore of greatest importance today to have platforms that encourage entrepreneurship among young people and help them to build their knowledge and take collective action to succeed in their future. Particularly for young girls, this 'entrepreneurial spirit needs to be constantly imbibed.

To this end, EdelGive Foundation's #UdyamStree campaign is a unique platform that will accelerate women entrepreneurship across the country whilst fostering gender equality. We are focusing on mobilizing the youth towards recognizing gender equality and building entrepreneurship as a tool to foster it even further.

In the words of Franklin Roosevelt, *'We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.'*

The author is Chairperson & CEO, EdelGive Foundation

Views are personal.