Strength of Women facing Adversity

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Invited speaker to the Arya Samaj South Africa Woman's Day 2021 Hawan

Namaste and happy Woman's Day to all you amazing women on this meet!
Thank you for this opportunity to shine the light specifically on women today and to say we celebrate you, we honour you, we respect you, we recognise your strengths, we salute the Divine within.

The presentation, "Strength of women facing adversity" will be discussed using the concept of women and caring. For centuries women have been associated with the ethic of care. The act of caring requires you to displace your own interests and pay attention to the needs of another[1]. A caring person is described as one who displays empathy, is nurturing, who listens and values another, who promotes collegiality.

Caring is explained on two levels[1]. The first is "caring for" which relates to the task of taking care of another person. This is the mother who takes care of her family, the nanny who takes care of children, the healthcare professionals e.g. the nurses, therapists, social workers who are responsible for the wellbeing of their patients and clients. Tending to the needs of another person has traditionally been the role of women and this has continued from the home into the health sector where the caring professions are dominated largely by the female population. From our own experience of the COVID-19 pandemic we've witnessed how women, from our homes have displayed their resilience and indomitable caring spirit to provide support for families who have been afflicted by the virus. They expressed their caring through prayer, either alone or in groups, shared remedies for healing, cooked pots of nutritious food and conveyed words of comfort. From the home, the batons of kindness were extended to hospital-based staff as they fought to keep patients alive. We have other extraordinary women amongst us too that need a mention. Like our Sarita Bhenji, the wife of Dr Rambilass, who with no previous midwifery training

[1] Ramklass S. A framework for caring in physiotherapy education and practice. South African Family Practice. 2015 Mar 1;57(2):1-5.

safely assisted with the delivery of Smrithi's baby at home, quite unexpectedly, before they could get to the hospital.
We acknowledge all of you.

Caring is also explained at another level. This is 'caring about' which involves feelings for another person or community[1]. As mentioned previously, women in general, are perceived as caregivers, tending to the needs of others. But we also care about our place in society and how the agenda for transformation in South Africa has positioned us as a group, previously marginalised, for opportunities that we were denied. Gender equality in South Africa is enshrined in the Bill of Rights, in the National Gender Policy Framework and a in dedicated Ministry for Women, Children and People with Disabilities.

In broad terms, legislation has paved the way for women to move from positions where they are decision implementors into positions of decision-making. However, the 2016 report of the Department of Public Sector and Administration stated that most women occupy lower levels in the public sector which allows access to a job at entry level[2]. This affects their career in the long term as the succession from entry-level positions to higher management positions requires a considerable time frame and is often delayed[2]. Many government departments and those at institutional level have yet to meet the stipulated requirements for gender balance.
This is similar in the private sector. When compared to a pyramid, many more women are at the bottom of the pyramid in junior roles compared to fewer women at the top in senior roles[3].

Conceptions about gender roles, tasks and responsibilities are socially and culturally constructed. Beyond achieving gender targets, the real challenge lies in changing mindsets and behaviour[3]. We cannot do this alone. Men need to come on board to

[1] Ramklass S. A framework for caring in physiotherapy education and practice. South African Family Practice. 2015 Mar 1;57(2):1-5.
[2] Vyas-Doorgapersad S, Bangani A. The implementation of gender equality within the South African Public Service (1994–2019). Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review. 2020 Jan 1;8(1):1-0.
[3] Francke A. Create a Gender-Balanced Workplace. Penguin UK; 2019 Sep 26.

change the narrative that women require empowerment before they're considered for a position. Many of us have taken up opportunities for skills development; yet we're still excluded.

I was reminded by the keynote speaker at the 12th Mahathma Gandhi media lecture, Mr Jerome Klaaste, how the value of diversity in SA is undermined if women are excluded from decision-making platforms.[4] We need men to acknowledge and recognise the value of diversity that women bring to these discussions. The wheels are turning but they're turning very slowly. Mr Klaaste brought to our attention how women are now included as sports commentators and sports journalists in male dominated sports[4]. This inclusion is indeed transformation. But what more can be done to close the gender gap?

According to a report by the World Economic Forum on reducing the gender gap[5], companies need to first prioritise more than just pay to keep women in a job. Women want to take on challenging work, in a flexible environment that recognises both their personal and professional workload. Second, gendered career paths need to be broken down so women don't get stuck in job silos that are historically female such as communications, HR and support roles. Third, women are under-represented in Science, technology and engineering and Maths. (STEM). Their participation must be encouraged because the roles traditionally held by women e.g. in office administration is most susceptible to automation. When this happens, women will be rendered jobless. Fourth, know that the future is a skills world; how well you adapt will be more important than what you already know. During recruitment, progressive companies are using professionally designed interviews and well-designed assessments to level the playing field for candidates applying for a position. The best person with the skill fit for the job will be hired. Most important though, companies need to walk the talk and create a culture of conscious inclusion to grow more women leaders.

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[4] Klaaste J. The need for responsible journalism in nation-building. Keynote. 12th Annual Mahatma Gandhi Media Lecture. 6 August 2021. Durban University of Technology

[5] World Economic Forum. 5 Ways we lack gender balance in the workplace. 2020. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/5-ways-companies-can-progress-more-women-into-leadership-roles/. Site accessed on 5 August 2021

So I enquired from the ladies on the executive committee of the Arya Samaj Women's Forum what has kept them at the top of their game beyond the skills development rhetoric. They said it's their resilience, positive energy, their confidence and determination to succeed, their perseverance to help other women rise, their selflessness in guiding the success of team members, their integrity and risk-taking, their empathetic yet assertive nature, and role modelling a positive work ethic.

Exhibiting strengths like these, it is without a doubt that women can play a meaningful role in diverse work environments. A diverse workforce is known to achieve better outcomes by developing trust within the team, bringing alternate perspectives to discussions and displaying a variety of strengths.
Now having heard the efforts made to achieve diversity and gender balance, wouldn't you care about the conscious inclusion of women on your decision-making team?

Thank you

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Chairperson: Arya Samaj Women's Forum
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