



Does Gender Diversity Remain a Challenge Today?

Women make up nearly half of the world's workforce today, but they still make 77 cents for every dollar a man earns. They perform 66 percent of the world's work and produce 50 percent of the food, yet earn 10% of the income and own 1% of the property.

There's no shortage of statistics on gender equality, and like the ones above –proclaimed by President Obama, the United Nations and the World Bank – they all point to the same alarming gender imbalance, whether in employment, pay or property ownership.

“We are no longer in an era where physical strength is a core requirement for employment; ability is the main factor, therefore, gender discrimination should not exist,” says Meera Kaul, founder and CEO of Meera Kaul Foundation (MKF) and the recipient of multiple awards.



Meera Kaul

MKF promotes women's employment in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, where jobs are higher paying and the growth potential is increasing. At the same time, it invests in women led and owned enterprises.

"There needs to be a societal shift of focus towards partnerships – in marriages and work – where women's careers are given equal weight. Very soon, the most important jobs in the market place will be STEM jobs. Unless women participate in great numbers in the STEM economy, we will be left behind and become unemployable."

Closing the gender gap

Whilst 2014 saw an increase in the number of women with qualifications, in the field of sciences, these women did not enter the workforce for a variety of reasons. Among them were familial barriers, such as working in a male-dominated society and the deep-rooted notions of a woman's role as a homemaker.

Another persistent obstacle tends to be women themselves not believing in their own abilities, according to Kaul. "This requires a lot of mentorship, in order to make women more educated about the opportunities available to

them and confident to pursue them," she says.

A third challenge is societal, given that an unconscious and pervasive bias still exists towards male employment, particularly in the STEM sector, leading ultimately to a gender gap. Moreover, a study carried out by MKF last year found that society and media driven perceptions actually inhibited girls from liking cognitive subjects like mathematics by the age of five.

Domino effect

As difficult as it may be to change perceptions that are almost ingrained in society, Kaul figured out a number of ways to address these challenges.

One of them was the "100 Women in STEM", an initiative that is creating a domino effect on women throughout the world, as they begin to see one another as cohorts and empower those around them, creating an adaptive and flexible network of support.

The UAE was the latest destination for this initiative. As recently as in January 2015, the Women in STEM conference was held at the Jumeirah Emirates Towers in Dubai to recognize women who have risen through the ranks of their peers, either as employees or as entrepreneurs, in the region's STEM sector.

These women were initially invited to share their inspirational stories in the form of a two-minute video that they could record even from their cell phones. The videos were then aired during the conference, after which the winners were selected based on their determination, resilience, and entrepreneurial spirit, rather than the success or failure of their job or venture.

"We always host our annual global



conferences in the UAE. We believe that the UAE has what it takes to become a model nation in gender balance and parity," Kaul told Insight Magazine.

A billion dollar industry

January's conference also featured MKF's first hackathon in the UAE, focusing on women software programmers and graphic designers to identify and showcase their wide-ranging expertise.

"Nearly 53% of gamers today are women," says Kaul, "but, there are only a handful of female game developers. Women developing games for women can be a billion-dollar industry, and we hope to enable and assist with the progress of this industry."

"We will be hosting a series of these skill development women hackathons this year, and will be teaching women to code for a game, which they can commercialize and build as a business at the end of the two days."

Although the term Hackaton has negative connotations, it is in fact a Silicon Valley term denoting the promotion of innovation. The word 'hack' literally means to break a code; to create something new.

"Our hackathons usually take place in Silicon Valley and involve the foundation inviting several women that vote in their entrepreneurial ideas into a room. Here they are encouraged to talk to one another about their ideas, and a vote is cast for the best

ideas."

Teams are then formed, made up of designers, coders and a host of other skilled women, creating an innovative environment in which the teams develop a strategy and architecture for the selected ideas. These hack sessions often last through the night, according to Kaul, and the final ideas are presented to a Hack Jury, who award a winning team with seed money to start-up their business.

Gender bias app

Taking things further, MKF recently released a dynamic app that enables women to rate companies on different factors related to their 'women friendliness', and control how these firms treat them. Called 'Parity', the gender bias app is already available to download on iTunes and Google Play.

"The intention is to move the power to the hands of women and act as a positive influence, allowing companies to improve their policies with sound data and analytics. Many companies around the world have been publishing gender diversity data – this doesn't mean anything. They are just numbers."

"We want to ensure that women take it in their own hands to determine the gender friendliness of their organizations," explains Kaul, who was voted one of the Top 50 women in telecom space by CommsMEA, the region's leading telecoms publication

In the next phase of the app's development, MKF will be publishing a gender bias index and will rank companies for the quality of their policies and work culture, so that by looking at the feedback, women can decide how female-friendly these corporations are.

Investment efforts

A serial entrepreneur herself, Kaul has incubated, financed and promoted technology ventures around the world, and now through her foundation, she runs two types of investment initiatives. The first is a fund that invests in women entrepreneurs while tracking the success of their business endeavor.

"Typically, the span of a fund investment is between 3-5 years, at which point the female entrepreneur knows exactly how to run a business, and we can roll the capital back into the fund, for use in another project," explains Kaul.

The second type of investment is educational. "Every year we provide scholarships for women, invest in training and development programs, and host seminars, conferences, and hackathons to encourage women to become equal participants in their respective economies."

MKF itself is a role model for gender equality, hiring both male and female employees based on their individual competencies, as Kaul emphasizes.

"At Meera Kaul Foundation, we embody the policies we look to imbue in other organizations and hire according to capability. We can most certainly be considered an equal opportunity employer".

- Heba Hashem