

Looking beyond the corporate gender equity

What needs attention is self-image of women and their dissociation with sexuality

Reji Varghese

The past few years have seen a surge in gender equity conversations, whether on changing the laws to support women at the workplace or designing interventions in organisations to create a more equitable culture.

The most common programmes towards this include setting diversity targets, creating policies for a smooth transition back from maternity leave, and leadership programmes for women.

Deepa Agarwal has two decades of experience in the field of diversity and inclusion. Her work has been recognised by the Women Economic Forum, which awarded her the title of Exceptional Woman of Excellence, and the Centre of Global Inclusion, where she is now an expert panel member. She has been a visiting faculty member at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and has broken new ground in the corporate sector working and consulting with large Indian and multinational companies, especially in the FMCG sector.

She is also a regular speaker at international forums such as the United Nations-Volunteers, the Forum of Emotional Intelligence, the Women Economic Forum, and Vividh. She now runs Re-Link, a research based advisory DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) firm.

"While all of these corporate policies and diversity programmes have helped moved the needle and more and more organisations are taking up



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the cause of gender equity, one of the aspects that is less talked about but needs attention is that of self-image and the dissociation with sexuality among women and the mental health issues associated with it," she says.

"This is one of the reasons I wrote my recently launched book, *The Hangover of Choices*," Deepa says.

"The leadership programmes for women are effective in helping them become more intentional about their careers, but these do not always touch upon the deep-seated mindsets and the deeper issues that are often the bigger roadblocks to equity in its truest sense."

On the topic of the difference in traditional success parameters for men and women, she says, "Men are considered successful when their careers are flourishing and women are seen successful based on how well they are managing the domestic and home duties. Due to this, in spite of reaching the pinnacles of success at

the corporate workplace, women tend to feel they are 'not good enough', and work harder and sometimes even change their behaviours in order to find acceptance. Here again, there is a dilemma: assertiveness in women is seen as aggressiveness, and not a desired quality for a woman to display. And yet, it is exactly this assertiveness, a celebrated attribute, that a leader should possess."

The Hangover of Choices has received nationwide attention for its attempt to bring to the surface these unspoken aspects of mental health.

"The book has been presented in the form of fiction, to make it an engaging and a palatable read, rather than making it prescriptive. Through the story of the protagonist, my aim was to nudge the readers to take an honest look at themselves," she says.

"There is pressure on women to look good and even perfect," she says. "This is being amplified beyond proportions by the digitally altered world and filter-loaded images. A negative view of one's own body has many repercussions leading to unhealthy lifestyles. At one extreme are over-exercising, over-dieting and/or restrictive eating. At the other, are overindulgence and an avoidance of being seen in public, especially of doing physical activities in public, from the fear of exposing oneself. All these create subtle stressors and mental health concerns," she adds.

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