TRANSCRIPT

Madhavi Shankar: Women empowerment in India <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gupM7RMANZc>

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When I was younger, I lived across a garment? primary school where my housekeeper's daughter, Nandhini, used to study.

Every evening after school, Nandhini would come home to finish her homework, while waiting for her mother to finish work.

Curious, one day I asked her what was she working on. She said she was helping a 10th grader finish his homework. Nandhini was only in 7th grade at that time. I can assure you today with two masters degrees I probably still won't be able to solve that algorithm Nandhini was working on. Not without the help of Google.

A few years passed. I was prepping to leave to Australia to further my education, while Nandhini was prepping to get married. I protested to her mother. My mother offered to fund for her college education, but I was perplexed to learn that this decision was taken by Nandhini and her parents. She was confident that she did not have the skills to get through college. Her parents prayed on the sphere and proposed a solution: marriage. They convinced her that marriage is the solution to all of her problems and her reason for existence.

It was 2016. I've just returned from Australia and started SpaceBasic, a company focused on optimizing communication and collaboration within universities and student housing. A few months into starting Space Basic, I met Nandhini again. I quickly learned that this girl who loved solving problems for math for 10th graders was married with two children and working at a clothing store at 19. I felt a deep sense of disappointment and anger. This is when I realized there is a problem. There is a problem only our generation can solve. How will we contribute to growth when we can't achieve or create equal opportunities?

Gender inequality is not only a pressing moral and social issue, but it's critical to economic challenge. Over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from having the same jobs as men. Globally, countries are losing over 160 trillion dollars in wealth because of the difference in earnings between men and women. It's great that the government of India has created initiatives

to promote skills development, so that women can be a part of the workforce, but I personally believe that, apart from technical skills, what women really need are the skills that will help them build confidence in self morale. In fact, it wasn't just Nandhini's suffering from self- confidence, I remember sitting in this exact same auditorium in 2012 attending a campus recruitment session. I was thinking to myself: “What am I going to do with my life?”. I had no grades to be recruited by the companies, neither did I have the skills they were looking for. My male peers, however, laughed it off, knowing they'll figure it out. I couldn't help but think where did they get this confidence from. Are they born with it? Or are they brought up with it? Looking Back, the only reason why I could progress in my career is because I had access to real world opportunities to help me identify my skills and strengths. These need not textbooks, these did not necessarily inculcate textbook education. It's amazing to see year on year more girls and women are enrolling into schools and colleges. Girls are more successful than boys in clearing cluster exams (?). This trend has been consistent for over seven years. What's alarming, however, is that more girls are studying, but nearly 84% of them drop out before graduating. More women are going to college, but few are working. Today, as we speak, 250 million more Indian women could be employed, but are not.

So, when you think about it, what is the reason for this discrimination? In a country with strong traditional influences embarked(?) in us from young age, we often fail to question the concept of prejudice, a relatively rigid structure that has been imposed on us from such a young age. We, women, come with a blueprint of being caretakers whereas men are considered to be decision-makers or providers.

Most women, urban and rural, are brought up with the preconceived notions that education is the stepping stone towards finding a good husband, apparently the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Parents feel like they have fulfilled their duty by educating their daughters and what is left is marrying them off. Indian parents, especially, focus (on) saving all their lives for their daughters’ wedding rather than investing in her dreams and saving for her social growth.

Today, when someone asks me “Who are you?” or “Describe yourself”, I say to them I'm an entrepreneur. This word to me has no gender, it simply means I like creating goals, I like achieving targets, and I love waking up every morning with the mission to create impact. The only time I'm reminded of being a woman is when I'm at home or at a social family gathering, where I'm asked with concern why am I 29 and not married. Pay attention, they do not ask me how my company is doing or if I even employed, but I most definitely get asked why am I not married. When we see this in our own communities and do nothing about it, how can we influence women from low socioeconomic backgrounds to have a voice?

Besides these social norms, another major factor contributing towards discrimination has to do with lack of access to real world skills and role models. This is a problem women face globally, which contributes to them thinking they're not good enough or they're incapable of doing better.

I read an article the other day that kind of caught my attention. This article stated that India is one of the top countries in female workforce participation. Now, when I say top I mean backwards. We were ranked 121 out of 131 countries in female workforce participation. This article also read that nearly 50% of Indian women who find employment quit in the first one to two years. Honestly, I wasn't personally surprised to learn that only 9% of startup founders and cofounders are women.

It is at this moment, we at SpaceBasic acquired a platform consciously decided to create a talent pool of underrepresented students, and provide them with opportunities without bias of

background or gender. Our goal has been only to empower students regardless across cities or villages, we want to provide them with equal opportunities because we believe students are the future of our country's growth.

Guys, let me tell you, this goal changed my life. I remember staring at an email last December for a few minutes. This was no ordinary email, this email was from the Government of India and the United Nations stating that I was recognised as 2018 top women transforming India. With this acquired motivation, we went back to Nandhini's school last year and met with some other students and asked them what they aspire to be. Some said they want to be teachers, some said they want to be doctors, some wanted to learn to speak fluent English, while some had simpler dreams of going to college. When we asked them what can we do to help them achieve this, they look at us puzzled and said: “How do we do this after school?.” Gandhi said: “Educate a man and you educate a person, educate a woman and you educate a family.” While education is the fundamental towards upliftment, I often question what is the status of women in India today, since this quote 70 years ago. When you think about it, this is not a problem that only the governments can solve.

Here's a question: how many of our mothers are working? You will all agree with me when I say women are born with managerial DNA along with the DNA of primary caretakers. Here's how. Let's take our working mothers for example: they are dedicated to making sure that our home is in order, they are dedicated to making sure we are well nourished and well educated, and they manage to do all of this beautifully while being employed. Their time management and their multitasking skills are impeccable. Why not raise our generation with this sees of thought and help them recognise this trait in their DNA?

My mother was one out of two women studying Medicine in her entire Medical College back at the 80s. My co-founder and mentor, Indu, now a successful entrepreneur in the US, was one out of nine women studying Engineering here in Bangalore. Indu had to fight to have a women's restroom constructed in her college, because management did not find the need to have this basic amenity. According to them, there were not enough women to consider building a restroom. Today, you and I are able to question these fundamentals because of such inspiring women around us. They have raised their voice and led the way for equal opportunities. We all, men and women, have the power to make change, and create impact in someone's life in much smaller ways than we think. This in Nandhini. Nandhini… This is Vani, she is Nandhini's sister. She is 14 and she loves animals. When she grows up, she wants to be a veterinarian. This time we aim to do everything in our power to make sure Vani achieves her dreams and goes into the world and crushes it.

Everyone here today knows a Nandhini amongst us. Let's go back home and start with talking to our housekeepers and asking them what they or their children are doing. Perhaps this answer will change your life like it changed mine. Thank you.