



Vidya Educational & Charitable Trust

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Dear Reader,

"Love one another but make not a bond of love:

Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls."

- The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran

Words cannot express how proud and privileged I feel for the opportunity to convey my thoughts to you on this International Women's Day. I wish to dedicate this article and painting to my beloved father and my dearest Neeshma. And to my immediate family and friends, you have always supported me and given me the freedom to discover and push my own boundaries. Moments when I doubted myself, you never did! Thank you.

Today, we celebrate the many victories but also have the chance to reflect on and to renew our spirit in the fight for equality. Determination, courage, faith and the support of those around me, has given me the continued strength to fight inequality, in my own way. Being one of the first groups in Gujarat, India to use Forum Theatre to discuss women's issues and girl child literacy issues in the slums of Ahmedabad, has been a struggle. However, looking back at where VIDYA EDUCATION & CHARITABLE TRUST began, where it is today and where it is headed tomorrow, I can honestly say, the struggle has and continues to be a worthy cause. VIDYA is very close to my heart, it embodies my identity and my personal struggle to have my presence acknowledged. I thank you for recognizing the fight that not just women but men too, are engaged in and I especially thank you for allowing me to give you my personal perspective on the identity of a woman and the role it plays in her empowerment. I would also like to thank those men and women in my life who continue to support me. In my opinion, each woman's journey begins from the perspective of her mother's role and from there she has to create her own.....!

Identity?

A person's identity is as unique as her hand print. I believe that true empowerment begins when a woman empowers herself internally. This will give her the inner strength she needs to fight those in her life that are oppressing her (both men and women). Once she finds her identity and discovers her own voice, she will be a true role model.

If a woman's identity defines her being, then why is she so eager to change it in order to accommodate the identity of others?

Society has taken on the responsibility of defining the boundaries of a woman's identity. It determines what qualities are acceptable, beautiful, reasonable, shameful, inappropriate etc. As the only deciding body, one asks: who makes up this ultimate society that creates such defined rules? Society can be divided into many branches, such as political, family, social, the corporate world, etc. And in each branch, the role of the woman



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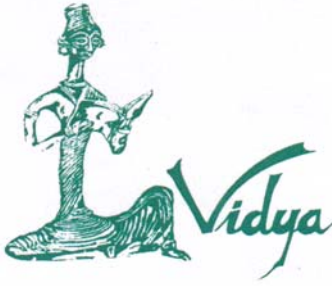
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is preconceived, in which case she identifies herself with the role rather than identifying the role that resembles her identity. For true empowerment to occur, she must first discover her own identity.

In the world of politics, it is the policy makers, mainly men, who decide the policies that should be in place for a better society. It is them that implement the various rules that secure and confine its citizens. In economic terms, it is the wealthy few that decide for the majority poor. The current role of a woman in the political arena is to be physically seen. With the implementation of having 33% women in positions of power, although with good intentions, our government needs to go further and make certain that the woman has and knows how to use the necessary resources and information to make effective decisions. Moreover, it needs to ensure that the decisions made are not done under any form of duress. Otherwise, this new rule will be used as another form of oppression where women are forced to implement policies that work against them, thus making the new rule counterproductive in empowering women. If a woman is placed in the role, she will not be as politically productive as had she campaigned and politically identified herself with the role.

Similarly, in the family situation, men are the dominant bread-winners and are again given the decision making power. Girls are taught from the beginning of their childhood to help with the housework and are brought up with the notion that once they are old enough, they have to be married off. Good girls do what their parents say and in many cases women are told to study Home Science so that they can become good housemates. They learn through the example that a clean home is a happy home. Boys are instilled with the belief that they should not do housework. The entire focus is on external factors, such as the clean home and the girl's physical appearance. Women grow up with the perception that they have to project a happy front regardless of how they feel internally. Girls are taught to be sacrificial and do what is good for the family rather than consider what is good for her. In the family circle, women are given the role of holding the family unit together. Using guilt as a mechanism, women within the family oppress one another if one decides to differentiate herself from the group. When girls turn into mothers, many pass on the teachings they received, thus making mothers oppress their own daughters. Daughters are also handed the family honour at birth, the root of her identity stems from the burden of holding on to the good respect of her father's name. It forces her to create her identity within the boundaries of the role she was handed when she took her first breath.

Although there has been an increase in the number of women entering the corporate world, there still remains a large disconnect between the expectations of a woman and a man inside and outside of the workforce. Women are still expected to maintain their households, raise their children, in addition to working. Higher up the ladder, women that have entered the boardroom create a hostile environment for other women wishing to work their way up. The in-gender competition creates a cycle of oppression that women create for themselves. Also, women that have reached the board room or made it into the "boys club", in many cases, begin to embody the masculine traits of their colleagues. They epitomize male characteristics in order to remain tough and rugged. These women lose most of the feminine qualities which in their opinion is a sign of weakness. The role laid out for women in the business world is to be competitive and masculine, that is in addition to fulfilling the roles already set by the other branches of society. Women that enter the business world figure out what qualities they must embody in order to survive and change themselves to fit into that predetermined mold.



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In all branches of society, women are being dominated because they, themselves alter their identities to accommodate the roles defined by others. As a child, a girl is always told that once she is married, it will not just be a marriage of the two individuals; instead it represents a marriage between the two families! This instills the mindset that she must change to fulfill each individual's expectations of her while disregarding her own. The first step in really empowering women is to make them realize that change has to develop internally and then be projected externally. It should be from the inside-out and not from the outside-in. Women are always asked to change roles, however, we do not realize that we are not simply changing roles but rather we are adding to the roles we are already fulfilling. For example, in the case of a working mother, in addition to being a full-time earner, she is also the principal parent of the child. Women need to step outside of the sacrificial role that has been imposed on them and define their own rules. Letting them decide for themselves, having them create their own internal society with their own criteria's will enable them to determine if they want to change and what changes they would like to make, irrespective of race, religion, age, etc. This is where the true progress of a woman lies because it is giving her the freedom to discover her identity for herself; to question herself based on her own beliefs and desires. It enables her to seek out her own balance between her mind and her heart.

Today, even gender lines have blurred, where men and women are working together to promote the rights of women but our ultimate victory will be reached when each woman discovers, loves and promotes herself. Only then will the resources and opportunities available to women be fully utilized by them. This fight for equality has been partially won on a macro level but we need to realize that we must step-up the fight at the grassroots level if we are to continue in the right direction. Each woman needs to find her own solution to her own inequalities as her encounters are unique. One possible path to independence is through entrepreneurship. A woman can achieve financial freedom but in order to do so she has to overcome many challenges that cannot be simply classified as gender based. By first identifying herself as an entrepreneur, she will be well prepared for the path that leads to the discovery of her (internal and external) strength as an individual, which along her journey will help her face those challenges. In no way, am I deterring the current progress made towards women's rights but what I wish to say is that we cannot make inequality a gender based issue because when we state our issues as women's issues, we confine the movement. Our campaign should not be: free the woman, instead it should be a movement for the freedom of the woman.

Thank you and warmest wishes,

Ms. Manisha S. Mehta
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