



'Women's empowerment, a key policy goal'

AZIZ HANIFFA

Following the success of the National Federation of Indian American Associations' first Women's Empowerment seminar last year, organized by its Women's Committee chairperson Angela Anand, the NFIA did an equally successful encore this year.

Dr Alyssa Ayres, deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs, keynoted the conference and began with lauding the NFIA for being 'impressive in its reach, bringing together so many Indian American organizations under one umbrella,' and also putting together the Women's Empowerment seminar 'that comes at a fortuitous time.'

Ayres — who has lived in India and written extensively on India and South Asia, including her PhD dissertation; is a fluent speaker of Hindi and Urdu; and is married to Sadanand Dhume, scholar in residence at the American Enterprise Institute — said, 'Women's empowerment is a key policy goal for the Obama administration and the State Department. Secretary (of State, Hillary) Clinton has made women's empowerment a high priority for everything that we do. She has elevated the focus on women's empowerment, appointing the first-ever Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanie Verveer.'

She said the administration's point man for South Asia, Assistant Secretary of State Robert O Blake, 'is a great supporter and believer in the benefits of ensuring girls and women are given the tools they need wherever they live in the world to reach their full potential.'

She added that the administration had started a number of promising initiatives under the rubric of the US-India Women's



Dr Alyssa Ayres, deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs

Empowerment Dialogue, which was launched in 2010.

Ayres said at the third meeting of the US-India Women's Empowerment Dialogue in February in New York co-chairs Neela Gangadharan, secretary, India's Ministry of Women and Child Development, and Ambassador Verveer had 'compared perspectives and shared best practices in both countries related on women's social and economic empowerment, political participation of women, early childhood education, skill development of women and girls, and strengthening of institutional linkages and exchanges. They reviewed the progress that institutions in the US and India have already achieved and discussed new ideas.'

The South Asia bureau, she said, had been 'partnering with the NGO Room to



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Angela Anand, chairperson, Women's Committee, NFIA

Read in India and other South Asian countries to promote girls' education through the scaling up of their Girls' Scholarship Program. Bureau Funding reached 1,200 girls since we started — girls who would otherwise not be able to attend secondary school.'

She added, 'We are also working with our colleagues in the American embassy in India to support the exciting 10x10 Initiative... a film and social action campaign to build a global movement that will promote education for girls.'

Ayres said, 'Cross-cutting these initiatives from within our bureau, we also have many exciting initiatives being led by the Secretary's Office of Women's Issues.'

One major priority, she said, was supporting women's self-help groups in India.

'There are an estimated three million self-help groups in India representing 33 million members. The groups develop their members' leadership abilities, increase school enrollments, address access to justice issues, and improve nutrition for women and children. Self-help groups in India also represent the largest microfinance effort in the world. Since self-help groups are often only able to develop products for their local communities, they need training to take their products to the next level.'

In this regard, she added partnering with the private sector was imperative and cited the example of Goldman Sachs' 10,000 women program — a five-year initiative to provide a business and management education to underserved female entrepreneurs in developing and emerging markets.

Ayres said another priority was Panchayat (village level governing body) training 'to try and institutionalize lasting change.'

Exhorting the Indian-American community to also get involved in these public-private partnerships, she said, 'Educating women and girls is of critical importance. Educating girls, especially in developing countries, is beneficial for entire families, economies and societies. Educated women produce fewer and healthier children and can invest more in those children. They are less likely to be married at a young age, and with educational and economic opportunities, are less vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking.'

She added, 'The social benefits of educating girls are undeniable, but so too are the economic benefits. In countries where girls' education has traditionally lagged behind boys' education, those countries also lag behind in overall economic development.'



Dr Kalpana Kochhar, chief economist, South Asia, World Bank

World Bank economist presents India's harsh truth

AZIZ HANIFFA

Dr Kalpana Kochhar, chief economist, South Asia, World Bank, in no-holds-barred remarks at the National Federation of Indian American Associations' Women's Empowerment conference, slammed the gender inequality in India.

One of the senior-most Indian Americans at the World Bank, she came armed plenty of statistics and said, 'South Asia has the highest gender inequality in the world. The gender inequality index uses five indicators including maternal mortality, adolescent fertility, parliamentary representation, educational attainment, and labor force participation, and South Asia ranks the worst on these indicators, even compared with the Middle East and North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.'

The figures she went onto quote had some of the older Indian-American men in the audience squirming and muttering that she was citing old figures, but none bold enough to challenge her.

Zeroing in on one indicator — nutrition — Kochhar said the statistics in South Asia and India were 'appalling.'

She said, 'Forty-two percent of children in South Asia suffer from wasting defined as low weight for age,' and the figure was even higher for India, '44 percent.'

She added, 'Forty-seven percent of children in South Asia suffer from stunting, defined as low height for age,' and even here, the figure was higher for India, '50 percent.'

Kochhar said, 'Second, gender matters for nutrition indicators. Looking at the percentage of children aged 6 months who are two standard deviations below expected weight for age, the percentage is roughly equal at around 32 percent for boys and girls. By age 5, the gap widens significantly between boys, 44 percent, and girls, 49 percent... These differentials persist into adolescence — the percentage of girls 15-19 who have a body mass index of below 18.5 is 47 percent in India.'

She said, 'In conjunction with the high rate of adolescent girls having children, we are perpetuating a lifecycle of malnutrition. We know for a fact that pregnant women in South Asia put on less weight during pregnancy than they should — 5 kilo