



The NFLA's Women's Empowerment Panel

PARESH GANDHI

'Tell the stories of your mothers and grandmothers'

AZIZ HANIFFA

The National Federation of Indian American Associations' Women's Empowerment seminar this year also invited accomplished Indian-American men as speakers, who acknowledged the indispensable role of women in society and the importance of education in a country like India if it were to truly emerge as a developed country.

Islam A Siddiqui, one of the senior-most Indian Americans in the Obama administration, who serves as Chief Agricultural Negotiator with the rank of ambassador at the Office of the United States Trade Representative, lauded Angela Anand, chairperson, Women's Committee, NFIA, for making women's issues and empowerment a priority and said it was no secret that the empowerment of women was directly related to the level of education and necessarily a means to achieving economic prosperity.

He said while there was still much to be done, India had come a long way in lifting its people out of poverty and an integral part of it had been by providing health and education to its people, including women.

Dr Jagadish Shukla, professor and chair,

Climate Dynamics Program, George Mason University; president, Institute of Global Environment and Society; and a Padma Shri awardee spoke of how he grew up in a small village called Mirdha in Uttar Pradesh, which had no electricity, no roads, no running water, and no primary school building, but his mother, who though illiterate, had made sure he received an education.

"My mother was an illiterate woman from a village, but she is responsible for pretty much everything that I am doing today," he said, adding that when he became successful it was his mother who pointed out that he had done nothing for his village.

He said it prompted him to start a school project there for 500 Dalit girls and ever since he founded the Gandhi College for women, "it is such an amazing pleasure to go back to my village and see the girls now talking about all of the social issues and problems in the village," and how vested they were in solving these problems.

He added, "The reason I am telling you this story is please don't get discouraged by the enormous problems, the bureaucracy and everything else you will encounter in India. I agree there are enormous challenges, but it is doable. And, the actual cost

of doing these things and making such a difference in the lives of these girls is not very large. It is only a question of not giving up. You just must make up your mind that you want to do it and you can do it."

Dr Bhakta Rath, a Padma Bhushan recipient and associate director, Research for Materials Science and Component Technology, who currently serves on several planning, review, selection committees and advisory boards for the US Navy, the Department of Defense, and the National Research Council, spoke of the role of women in science.

"They are far more productive than their male counterparts," he said.

Rath, in whose name Michigan Technological University has established a research award for the best doctoral thesis in science and engineering, recalled how when he went to school in Michigan, "there was only one woman in our engineering class," but when he visited his alma mater recently to deliver the commencement speech, "50 percent of the student body were women. It's a remarkable shift."

He said, "I have no doubt that the women of Indian origin will set an example to the women of the world."

Ajita Talwalker, special assistant to the

under secretary of the Department of Education, said it was a myth that all Indian Americans were affluent and spoke of her own family where her parents were public servants and she had to go to college on financial aid and after graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, was left in debt.

Today, she said, most college graduates ended up with more than \$100,000 in debt, and said this was why President Barack Obama was committed to alleviating the needs of these students through various grants.

Robin Read, president and chief executive officer, National Foundation of Women Legislators, Inc, paid rich tribute to erstwhile Iowa legislator Swati Dandekar, the first Indian American lawmaker in this important presidential caucus state and the first India Abroad Person of the Year.

Read said how Dandekar as chairman of National Foundation for Women Legislators had fought and succeeded in holding the organization's annual convention in Iowa much to the chagrin of the board and its members.

She said, "People didn't want to go there and earlier hadn't even wanted her to be chairman because they didn't know her much. But Swati gave us the best convention ever and helped us raise over \$500,000. Swati is my heroine."

She told the second generation among the audience how important it was "to tell the stories of your mothers and grandmothers, who had the courage to come here and achieve what they have, while raising families."

World Bank economist presents India's harsh truth

◀ Page A18

grams (11 pounds) on average compared to the worldwide average of close to 10 kilograms (22 pounds). Too often, new mothers are still children themselves, a staggering 75 percent of them are anemic, and some one third of all babies in India are born with low birth weights.

Kochhar then tackled malnutrition in India, saying, "Our work shows that the biggest determinants are one, your level of income — the higher it is the lower the inci-

dence of malnutrition; two, the level of the man's education; three, to a lesser extent, the level of the woman's education, but more important the woman's role in decision making; and four, access to sanitation and clean water.

To alleviate these problems, she added, "We need to target men. They are the missing link in this story."

She spoke about the high social acceptance of violence against women — 56 percent of males and 51 percent of female adolescents—15-19 years—think that a husband is justified in beating his wife if she burns the food, argues

with him, goes out without telling him, refuses sexual relations or neglects the children; sex selective abortions; and dowry murder, and said "educating men and targeting interventions to them holds the key to unlocking this vicious circle in India."

She added, "Men are often the decision makers in the home. They need to be educated about the benefits of good hygiene, good nutrition for the women and girls, etc... Unless fundamental behavior changes occur, no broad based changes can occur in the true empowerment of women."