AJF empowers women & girls through 4E capitalization

Almas Jiwani is the President and CEO Almas Jiwani Foundation, the President Emeritus of UN Women Canada and an Internationally renowned Speaker & Philanthropist.
The Audacious Catalyst and Epitome for Gender Equality and Women Economic Empowerment.
She graced request of Mélange International for an exclusive interview.

Q: What are major factors affecting gender equality?

Ans: One of the main obstacles, in my opinion, is that women disproportionately lack access to the tools they need for success, notably finances, education, technology and a sense of self-confidence. Women are denied loans and financial support in many countries around the world for their entrepreneurial endeavors; often loans can only be taken out by husbands or a male relative, which not only discourages women entering the business or start-up instead, it promotes patriarchal values. Finally, there is a large confidence gap between men and women in business, and this gap exists in all countries, including the developed countries such as Canada. Empowering women by focusing on renewable energy brings two fold powers in their lives, i.e. light and communication. This can become a catalyst for turning an ordinary grass roots woman into an entrepreneur. Cellular phones can reduce the gap and empower remote women.

Q: What is the status of gender equality in our country. How can we improve the situation at grassroots level?

Ans: We are getting there… It will always be a challenge for our women to face this gap in equality…Nevertheless, we are achieving this and adapting and facilitating methods to empower and support women on all fronts. I do not believe we have achieved it even though we are getting there or I would not have started the AJF. Our mission statement as a foundation is to empower women and girls through

focused projects that will directly address gender equality, education, and energy and entrepreneurship rights affect; their lives in positive, meaningful ways. AJF programs are aimed at empowering girls and women by expanding access to education, increasing economic opportunity, and providing or improving access to the energy at the most local levels possible. An improved access to energy will yield a co-benefit of better use of technology and modern communications systems, including smart phones and the internet. Our goal is to elevate millions of women out of poverty. The technologies that we in the west take for granted, could affect these communities the most, and help them harness their power for economic gain.

Q: Why our work matters?

Ans: The threats and challenges women and girls face all across the globe are more sinister and fierce than ever. From the ravages of war and famine to sexual and reproductive rights and health, women are frontline fighters for their own survival, for the survival of their communities, and for the survival of their lands. In a context of increasing violence and environmental devastation; AJF proposes and will provide opportunities for the empowerment of women and girls through its 4E capitalization, as this has the potential to change the struggle from survival to 'thrive' of humanity. Empowering women is the single greatest tool we can employ to lift millions out of poverty, and is a resource that has been underused.

Q: At grassroots level, which modification can help in enhancing the future of women in business?

Ans: If we can facilitate and ensure access for women to enter business, be it through technology or equalizing access to capital, we can surely improve access to the markets for women. There is no limit to what they can accomplish. Technology, especially cell and Internet availability, is one thing that could vastly improve the lives and opportunities available to women. It allows us, access to markets and capitals not accessible to previous generations. It enables women to succeed in business while still participating in family life. It has shrunk the world, so it must be more readily available to make the impact that we need it to make.

Q: How global or regional level seminars, forums and conferences may help women entrepreneurs to excel in businesses?

Ans: Getting experts from different fields, expertise and nationalities and sharing their experiences and business journeys, will empower and educate women entrepreneurs: we need to facilitate networking for women to connect and engage with each other. At any point, if we must get in touch with those who have been successful together to share some best practices with other businesses and future talent. The evidence proves the value of women in business and through these forums in a meaningful way can further enhance their value.

Q: Whom you personally view the better leaders; men or women?

Ans: I think both have their strengths and we need diversity in leadership positions. I believe that women are great leaders, as women make significant differences. Women are born with many attributes that make them great leaders in life, in business and most importantly leaders of themselves; few traits We possess: We are passionate about what we do; We are great in team workers! We are patient; We take initiatives; We adapt to change; We look for self-development and self-education; We are sympathetic and help others and we embrace whatever comes our way. We can also say that the most effective leaders, mainly women are those who can meet the end goal without isolating any one particular group. By including everyone in the process and allowing the most gains for those who are part of the 'project'. Great leaders can be male or female, young or old; the leader is made of the qualities, they possess.

Q: How would you like to comment on current scenario of global boardrooms?

Ans: Globally there is a direct correlation between business success and women on boards. Those companies who have gender diversity perform better in the market place; it is as simple as that. However, I also believe our structure benefits from diversity. It brings different processes of thinking to important issues. We

work in a conductive environment and deliberate this process to be far more effective. The scenarios in boardrooms for global organizations across the world are looking positive with most countries mandating quotas of 40%+ by 2017 (only a year away). Currently, these numbers are on the rise and within the next year, we can see them bridging these quotas.

Q: Do you favour the concept of quotas in boardrooms?

Ans: Partially, quotas help solve the immediate problem of gender equality in the boardrooms, however to be a fully equal boardroom that is effective in achieving its goals and purposes, boards need to consist of those that are most qualified to represent. Those will inadvertently, include women, men, minority groups, alternatively enabled bodies, and all other marginalized groups. Allocated quotas must be used for expansion in the recruitment of talent, to ensure that men and women are receiving the training and then steps will allow to succeed at leadership levels.

Q: What can women on higher positions do for the ones who are willing to break the so- called glass ceiling?

Ans: It would be a great initiative if women leading in high positions upon advisory boards, connect with each other to create a community and network for all women who want to break through the glass ceiling, and offer them mentorship and leadership programs, facilitating career opportunities within their organizations and others. Creating this network and platform by getting like-minded women together, will reinforce the power women have. As the former US Senator, Elizabeth Dole stated, "My objective as Secretary of Labor is to look through the 'glass ceiling' to see who is on the other side and to serve as a catalyst for change." This is a wise and positive way of looking at things.

Q: What is your contribution in the improvement of status of women in work places?

Ans: Being a woman in a leadership role, who has spoken around the world on gender equality importance of inclusion diversity and the empowerment of women, I feel that I contributed in running awareness. I have been able to encourage companies and organizations to create diverse boards, support women entrepreneurs and inspire groups to look at women as viable contenders in economic development.

Q: Do you long for doing something in this regard in near future by which you can contribute to the women community?

Ans: Yes, with the formation of the AJF (Almas Jiwani Foundation), I am taking a step further to help encourage and promote diversity and gender equality across the globe; supporting the education, enterprise and environment of women and girls in both developed and the developing world. In addition to this, our foundation is also focusing on expanding technologies available to women, through access to energy and communications

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Interview by Mélange International Team