

BEYOND
NORMAL *Indu Balachandran*



MONEY MATTERS, & so does gender

Consider this scenario: A ten-year-old boy typically gets his first 'job' mowing the lawn or helping dad wash the car, and proudly receives his first 20 bucks. A ten-year-old girl looks after her younger sibling or helps mom in the kitchen — but, of course, she does it all for free. The boy gets his first experience of expecting money for work done and spends it on a treat for himself. The girl gets her first experience of expecting nothing for merely doing her female domestic duty and is content with a nod of approval.

As much as this is a generalisation, boys and girls get their gendered world-view about working for money quite early — including managing personal finances. Money matters are dealt with by the male in the family. Despite housewives and mothers managing household expenses with great skill and forethought, financial planning and investing are still seen mostly as the husband's preserve.

Gender watchers believe that men see money as a symbol of success and power; women see it as the means to ensure security and proof of their love. Now this is making a lot of feminists I know really mad: sure, love is important, but have you ever tried to pay off a bill with a hug?

Jokes apart...
The story is told of a young lady intern who was advised to begin her first office presentation with a joke. So she put a picture of her pay slip in the opening slide.

Her male colleagues laughed the loudest (perhaps to camouflage the fact that they were getting paid much more), but women are finding it no laughing matter that a gender gap continues to prevail over salaries in the workplace. Yet when it comes to spending, women are tagged as the ones who

make hard-earned money vanish faster than you can paint the word 'Sale'.

Men earn, women yearn, said a standup comedian at a show I went to. And he also went on to tell us about how he didn't report his missing credit card for days on end. "The thief is spending less than my wife..." was his explanation. Needless to say, all the men laughed much more than we women did.

Money makers
Empowered women are fighting for equal pay at workplaces around the world, but still have much to achieve. Unless we're talking about the ladies who work at the government mint, making money is still seen as a masculine talent. Our epics tell us Draupadi was one hell of a financial whiz in managing money matters for the Pandavas, but the list for the top 10 richest people today doesn't feature a single woman's name — they are all men. I suspect this includes, though unofficially, the Nigerian Prince who continues to scam little old ladies to part with their wealth through persuasive emails.

Meanwhile, with the year-end around the corner, and resolutions for a prosperous new year high on your list, remember to make this money resolution for yourself, man or woman.

Always live within your income. Even if you have to borrow money to do so.

(He Said/She Said is a monthly column on gender issues — funny side up. Reach the author at indu-bee@yahoo.co.in)



When narratives of “too bossy” or “too emotional” hold women back, it should not just be a moral imperative but a business one as well, as emotionally attuned leaders foster stronger teams and better outcomes, writes **Mette Johansson**

The invisible biases SHAPING CAREERS



Mette Johansson

Every day in workplaces across the world, implicit biases and stereotypes quietly shape perceptions, decisions, and career trajectories. In India, a country with a unique cultural and social fabric, these biases take on distinct forms — challenging women as they navigate professional spaces while balancing traditional expectations. What are these pervasive myths and what can be the actionable solutions for change?

Breaking free from gender myths
In my experience, one of the most damaging myths is the idea that women are “too emotional” for leadership roles. This stereotype undermines their credibility, regardless of their professional expertise. In India, where expressions of emotion are often viewed through a gendered lens, this narrative persists in boardrooms and beyond. Yet, it's important to recognise that emotional intelligence is a critical leadership skill, encompassing empathy, adaptability, and conflict resolution — qualities every organisation needs.

Another pervasive myth is the perception of meritocracy. While many organisations claim to reward talent and effort, unconscious biases often tip the scales. Consider how a man's ambition might be lauded, while a woman's similar drive could be labelled as “aggressive” or “unfeminine.” This double standard affects not only performance evaluations but also access to opportunities.

Stereotypes around work-life balance
Work-life balance is another area fraught with gendered assumptions. In Indian workplaces, women are often viewed as primary caregivers, expected to shoulder domestic responsibilities alongside their professional roles. This dual burden limits their growth and feeds the narrative that they are less committed to their

careers. It's a myth that not only affects women but also men who face societal pressures to prioritise work over family life.

An anecdote shared by Indra Nooyi captures this dynamic perfectly. After announcing her appointment as PepsiCo's CEO, her mother's immediate response was to ask her to “go get

positions often find themselves walking a tightrope.

They must demonstrate assertiveness without appearing “too bossy” and show empathy without being perceived as “overly emotional”. These contradictory expectations are not just exhausting but also hinder progress.

The cultural context

India's rich traditions and cultural heritage often create additional layers of complexity for women. While urban centres have seen a rise in women professionals, deeply ingrained societal norms continue to limit their potential. For instance, women are frequently expected to prioritise family over career, making it harder for them to pursue leadership roles.

At the same time, the evolving corporate landscape in India presents an opportunity to address these biases. With multinational corporations and progressive start-ups shaping workplace norms, there is a growing recognition of the need for gender diversity. However, achieving true inclusion requires challenging the narratives that hold women back.

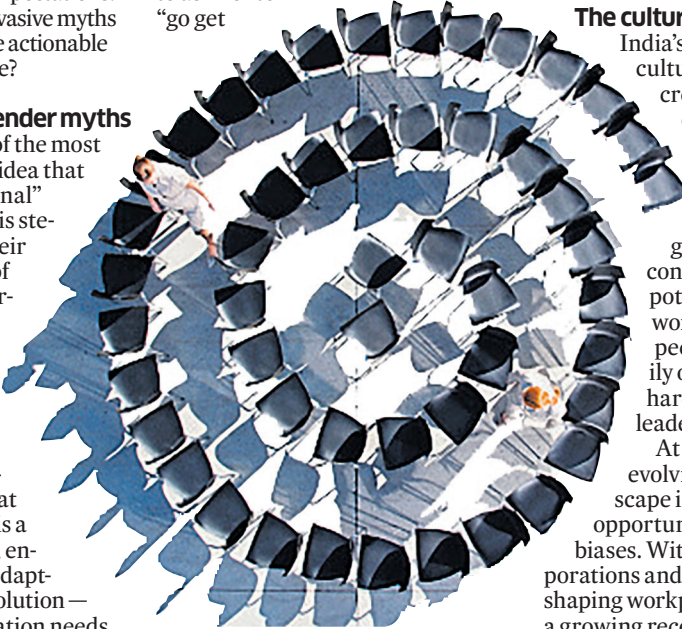
By adopting these skills, organisations can move beyond superficial diversity initiatives to create cultures where inclusion and equity are the norm. The journey may be challenging, but the rewards — for individuals, organisations, and society — are worth the effort.

some milk.” This story reflects the deep-seated cultural expectations that often undermine professional achievements.

Emotionality & leadership perception
Indian women are frequently told to “control their emotions” in the workplace, perpetuating the idea that emotional expression is a weakness. However, research consistently shows that emotionally attuned leaders foster stronger teams and better outcomes. This disconnect between societal expectations and leadership realities creates a barrier for women aspiring to higher roles.

Moreover, women in leadership

where the workforce is increasingly global and dynamic, embracing gen-



Building skills to rewrite the narrative

- Tackling implicit bias and gender stereotypes requires collective effort. Here are some practical skills that individuals and organisations can develop:
- **Critical thinking:** Question the stories you tell yourself about gender roles.
 - **Evidence:** Are they based on evidence, or are they rooted in stereotypes? Encourage open dialogue to challenge assumptions.
 - **Empathy:** Understand the unique challenges faced by your colleagues. Recognise that caregiving responsibilities or expressions of emotion do not diminish professional competence.
 - **Allship:** Men and women must work together to create inclusive workplaces. Speak up when you notice biases and advocate for fair opportunities.
 - **Resilience:** For women, developing resilience is key to navigating biases. Build networks of support and seek mentors who can guide your journey.
 - **Inclusive leadership:** Leaders must model inclusive behaviour, fostering environments where diverse perspectives are valued. Provide platforms for women's voices to be heard and respected.



der equity is essential for sustained growth.

Leaders, policymakers, and individuals must reflect on the stories they uphold. By recognising and dismantling these narratives, we can create workplaces where everyone, regardless of gender, can thrive. Together, let's write a new story — one where biases are replaced with fairness, and potential is celebrated without prejudice.

(Mette Johansson is the author of Narratives: The Stories That Hold Women Back at Work.)

TRAVEL

Hidden travel gems from around the world

Discover destinations off the beaten path in Podlasie, Poland, the Island of Symi in Greece and Trier in Germany where primeval forests, mystical sites, and centuries-old craftsmanship await. These regions offer unusual adventures that immerse you in nature, culture, and local traditions, writes **Sonia Nazareth**

It bears repetition that if you're planning just a few adventures in the New Year, you will undoubtedly wish to make them count. If you're ready to push your limits a bit and explore the less-trodden path, you might face some unpredictability, and confront the unknown, but you're also likely to engage a lot more when you discover something new and vitally local.

The rustic charm of Podlasie, Poland
When I plan an initial foray into Podlasie, the draw for me is the UNESCO Bialowieza National Park, a five-star haven of biodiversity, home to the world's largest free-roaming population of European Bison. While this experience clearly makes it to an essential travel list, the region is strewn with gems, entirely removed from mass tourism. So, after visiting the primeval forests of Bialowieza, I drive one-and-a-half hours to the town of Janow Podlaski. The town is known for its world-famous horse stud farm, in which some of the world's finest pureblood Arabian and Anglo-Arabian horses are reared.

Nearby, the mighty Bug River flows on its 772-km route connecting Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. The Polish

span of the river, 587 km long, is a sanctuary for beavers, swans, cranes and unusual species of butterflies. From the village of Zabuze, I embark upon a catamaran cruise to acquaint myself with the river

As ethereal, is a stop by the evening light at the Holy Mountain of Grabarka, a destination for pilgrims of the centuries-old Orthodox Church. Upon a hill adjoining an Orthodox Church lies a sea of crosses of all shapes, sizes and materials. Upon these crosses, are devotional symbols from rosaries to amulets.

Another special site, noteworthy for the sheer passion and craftsmanship involved in creating it, is a small castle, fondly called “The Crown of Podlasie.” Its creator Jerry Korowicki conjured up this structural confection using his own finances. The result is now a whimsical building of hand-hewn and processed stone — accompanied by features like a moat and gardens, that are open to the public and that enterprising Jerry himself guides you through.

Another Podlasie gem is the “Herbal Corner” in Korycyn. This open-air museum (with a 17th-century wooden church) and ethnographic park are



The mighty Bug River flows through Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine.
PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



Trier has an abundance of world heritage sites.

where traditional architecture and museum meet botanical garden. Here, plants used for healing and the culinary arts over the ages, are cultivated across 12 hectares of land. In my time here, I wander from a pottery workshop to a herbal store and library, to a rose garden and rose café for home-made rose ice cream, to a store for handmade products, and to an inn to taste local specialties — like a carefree spirit. You can even book a stay in a traditional farmhouse if you'd like to extend what really is an engaging local experience.

Sparkling Symi in Greece
If ever I decide to retreat from big-city life, it would be to Symi, a Greek island, part of the Dodecanese islands. This island, around a one-hour ferry ride from very well-connected Rhodes, is a haiku of neoclassical homes, glorious beaches and a vibrantly alive harbour front. Sparkling Symi has an abundance of family-owned stores and artisanal studios. Most fascinating are those dedicated to sponge display and sale. I learned at the Dinos Sponge Center, that the earliest Greeks to dive for sponges hailed from Symi. At this oldest sponge shop on the island, in existence since 1939, I learned how the crew of a sponge-diving fleet taught other islanders to dive, process and trade sponge. You can now find a sponge for every need — including prized ones for face and body exfoliation.

Elsewhere, travellers strident with cardiovascular efficiency, swim in the sparkling blue-green waters of the harbour, while others walk up the hills for awe-inspiring views. Still others relax in island cafés, dining on sumptuous Greek salads and the freshest of fish, including the tiny red pan-fried shrimp, that can be eaten whole. Another gem is the Monastery of Archangel Michael Panormitis. This crucible of religious



The monastery of Archangel Michael Panormitis, Symi.

art, believed to have existed since the 15th century, is a feast of all things ornate. The interior of the chapel is plastered with wall paintings from the Byzantine period. The adjoining museum showcases icons and items of folk culture including boats related to the fishing tradition of the area.

Poetry in stone in Trier, Germany
Perfectly framed between the Moselle River and Luxembourg, is Germany's oldest city, namely Trier. This city, now peppered with UNESCO sites, was founded by the Romans who left ample evidence of their reign amid the ruins left behind. Notable among the offerings are an amphitheatre, a section of a town wall, a river bridge, ruins of Roman baths, and the remarkably well-preserved 2nd century Porta Nigra, or Black Gate. To admire this Gate is to do more than take its picture, but rather to appreciate the ingenuity of its construction, for this otherworldly affair is held together with nothing but iron clamps and the force of gravity. Architectural wonders from later times include some wondrous churches, for instance, the Trier Cathedral and Constantine Basilica. Also visit the Landesmuseum, home to a sprawling collection of Roman artefacts. This city is also the birthplace of Karl Marx. A university town, its centre brims with cafés. Vineyards and wineries are close at hand. While there's never a dull moment in Trier, factor in a bit more time to explore so that you can relish, rather than rush the experience.



Colourful houses dot the island of Symi.