

## Event Report

Enabling an Equiverse: 4W's- Equal access to Work, Wealth, Wellbeing and Welfare  
November 10&11, 2022

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In the past decade, nations have rushed to acknowledge the disadvantages women face concerning workplace participation, equal wage, reproductive health, and stigmatised gender roles. Yet, whilst many have acknowledged these contingencies, the policies and courses of action differ vastly from society to society. To the dismay of many activists and scholars, a popular trend in recent years is the erasure of women from the debate. Instead of uplifting women by specifically targeting their social disadvantages through guided dialogue and real-time policy, many have resorted to rendering women invisible through so-called gender-neutral policies.

Due to these developments, the **Konrad Adenauer Foundation's** (KAS) regional economic program SOPAS, in cooperation with **TalentNomics India**, launched a two-day conference titled "**Enabling an Equiverse: 4W's- Equal access to Work, Wealth, Wellbeing and Welfare**" to specifically discuss the issues women face in regard to their *work, wealth, wellbeing, and welfare*. With the goal of not only nurturing discussions, the conference also aimed to uplift and bring forth inspiration to talented, young women in India and encourage them to become the next generation of women in leadership roles.

The conference was held virtually on November 10 and 11, 2022 and consisted of five one-on-one interviews and four-panel discussions. Participants included renowned businesswomen and men from the Indian subcontinent, scholars focussing on women-participation in the private and public sector, as well as prominent political figures reaching from Japan to the United States.

### Format

The two-day conference was opened by the Country Director of KAS Japan and the Regional Economics Program (SOPAS), **Rabea Brauer**, as well as founder and Chief Executive Officer of Talentnomics India, **Ipsita Kathuria**. The following topics were discussed in the panel format:

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### **Creating Equity in the Work Space**

Despite having equal levels of education as their male counterparts, women systematically are underrepresented in the workforce and have lost out on employment and growth opportunities across multiple sectors. In order to counteract this trend, the panel introduced and discussed how women as individuals can be more productively engaged. In spite of the knowledge that women represent a non-accessed reservoir of talent and opportunity for the country, and that their systematic inclusion into the economy would benefit men and women alike, awareness revolving around this issue has not resolved the perpetuating inequality.

### **Restoring Personal Wellbeing**

Even though women have a socially and economically lower status than men, they still carry immense responsibility for their families and loved ones. The marginalised access to work opportunities, finance, and building a net worth - all crucial factors in creating a safe environment for families to flourish - creates tremendous pressure impacting both the physical and mental health of women.

### **Gender-Specific Welfare Networks**

The aforementioned issues can partially be mitigated through the implementation of Gender-Specific Welfare Networks which include both private and public policies providing a safety net to women and their families, inevitably leading to them excelling in their work networks and securing their wealth.

### **Empowering Through Wealth**

One of the key issues of the inequality debate concerns the wage gap between men and women. Even though women have the same qualifications and productive output as men, women earn significantly less than their male counterparts. At the same time, women invest more in education and the health of their families, subsequently providing them with less financial autonomy and thus less individual freedom to invest money beyond the family. As a result, women are less likely to build personal wealth and are more susceptible to dropping out of the workforce or losing their job.

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Whilst the panel discussions provided a well-rounded insight into the diverse range of views the individual panellists brought from an assortment of professional and academic backgrounds, the one-on-one interviews nourished a deeper understanding of the discourse on women empowerment on an individual basis. The following one-on-one interviews were included in the conference:

### **Panel 1: Her Story in Enabling an Equiverse**

Many women are often discouraged by the inequality in our society. Hearing encouraging voices is a paramount part of establishing a healthy and sustainable mindset for women to defy the odds and excel in society. **Shabana Azmi** shared her personal story of how she broke with pre-existing stereotypes in work, wealth, wellbeing, and welfare.

### **Panel 2: Investing in Women for Parity**

In this talk, angel investor **Padmaja Ruparel** shared her experience and advice regarding existing opportunities and challenges women face in the workforce. Her valuable insights into what can be done to bring women on par with men, which actors can help them succeed, and how society can keep women motivated were shared here.

### **Panel 3: Work, Wealth, and Well-being of Women in Organized Sector**

During this interview, we had the honour to speak to **Seiko Noda**, a member of the Japanese parliament. As a forerunner in the *Liberal Democratic Party* (LDP) in regard to women's rights and equality in Japan, Noda updated the participants on the progress and setbacks Japan has faced. Especially the cross-cultural comparison with India reminded everyone that women face the same challenges in industrialised and industrialising countries alike.

### **Panel 4: Success Differentiators for Work, Wealth, and Wellbeing of Women Entrepreneurs in South Asia**

Whilst the question of success and failure is a cohesive point of interest for all entrepreneurs, the specific understanding of why certain women prevail where others do not is integral in paving the way for future women's participation in the entrepreneurial sector. **Dr. Radhicka Kapoor**, a well-established researcher, shared her findings on what sets successful female entrepreneurs in

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South Asia apart from other members of their cohort. By compiling the qualities and features of successful female entrepreneurs, Kapoor shed a light on the factors that need to be encouraged to help many future women succeed in a male-dominated industry.

### **Panel 5: Progress and the Way Forward**

Joining from Washington D.C, **Peggy Clark**, CEO, and president of the *International Center for Research on Women* (ICRW) provided valuable insights into the global efforts of women empowerment, the challenges, and also success the global effort has faced.

### **Closing Manifesto to the Equiverse**

In the end, **Uma Sharma** shared her heartbreaking experience of how she avoided the fate of many middle-class women in India to be married off, by taking charge of her life, pursuing a career, and despite multiple hardships and setbacks, was able to prevail in becoming a successful career woman. Her story reminded all participants of the privation and battles women face today and encouraged all to keep fighting.

### **Summary**

In the following section, the main findings of the conference will be summarised.

Generally, the key driver to success for women in their respective careers is their ability to set up goals and fixate on a clear vision. This starts by reflecting inwards and finding a clear goal that they see for themselves and their surrounding society. Whilst internal aspects are integral to starting a successful business, the systemic barriers women face must equally be overcome on an institutional level. Thus, employers must invest themselves in creating an equitable environment by fostering higher women participation in the workforce. This is not only limited to providing women with fair employment, and promotion opportunities, but to providing educational and vocational experiences specifically for women, encouraging their confidence in taking on responsibilities.

Breaking with stigmas must continuously take place throughout society by explaining the importance gender diversity brings for all stakeholders, not only women. This means that educational institutions must be aware of gender biases, and a general effort must be made in regards to preventing their perpetuation among future generations.

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Awareness of rights should be equally distributed among populations. Women and men alike should be acquainted with their rights to equal access to opportunity and resources. On the other side, policymakers should be aware of the benefits diversity and gender equity deliver concerning sustainability and productivity. The responsibility for change in society lies with all stakeholders equally.

Caregiving is still primarily undertaken by women, leaving them to deal with the challenges alone. This situation is even more challenging as women and their roles as caregivers oftentimes are taken for granted. One of the primary steps needed to be realised is spreading awareness on the labour-intensive work of caregiving, and equally distributing responsibilities between men and women. In an ideal setting, caring for others should become an inherently human form of interaction, disconnected from any gendered expectation.

Well-being comes as a result of both internal realisation and external validation of one's concerns. As a result, it is recommended that employers and companies should offer self-reflection and evaluation services to their female employees enabling them to observe their mental modality and fostering an environment where a heightened awareness of mental well-being can be achieved.

Pressure to choose between family and a career should ideally not exist, and women should freely be able to pursue a path at their own discretion. In order to offer such an equitable environment to women, a well-constructed work-life balance should be achieved through a diversified and flexible work schedule. This enables women to excel in their careers while also performing their commitments through childbirth, parenting, nursing, or elderly care. Simultaneously, it must be normalised that men also take on responsibilities in the family realm. For an equitable understanding of the shared responsibilities to be realised, men must have long working hours reduced, and women must have the opportunity to extend their work time. Subsequently, policymakers will inevitably have to enact measures that can create a social environment in which men and women can freely choose both work and living styles that are harmonious with individual aspirations.

Individual reflections are also necessary for achieving an equitable environment without archaic gender stereotypes. The first step in achieving this is for individuals, both men and women alike must become aware of their own internalised biases and stereotypes.

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Having women in entrepreneurial positions and business leadership realms is a crucial step in achieving gender equality. For one, this exposes more women to leadership roles and can inspire more to push forward into the business world, but even more importantly, women entrepreneurs act as a catalyst and are the forerunners in hiring more women into their businesses. As a result, more female entrepreneurship will inevitably lead to more women participating in the workforce.

The talks equally highlighted the importance of role models and inspiration for young women, as seeing successful women will provide other women with the necessary courage to push out of their comfort zones. This will normalise that women can deviate from the norm, and succeed in the business world.

In the 2022 study *WeScale: Success Differentiators for Women Entrepreneurs*, Dr. Radhicka Kapoor investigates 23 case studies of successful female entrepreneurs from South Asia. She was able to establish that there is no singular factor that enables success in female entrepreneurs, but that a combination of them created the successful, thriving women in her study. Kapoor was able to identify seven trends that these 23 women had in common:

1. educations, skills, and formal degrees
2. family supportive of entrepreneurial endeavours
3. all succeeded in non-traditional sectors
4. followed a structure model of experimentation (not overnight success, but trial and error)
5. role models and mentors played a key role
6. prior work experience essential
7. personality characteristics: self-efficiency, curiosity, hardworking, etc.

Financial success and independence come with high degrees of financial literacy. Especially for women, who are the primary figures tackling health, education, and care in families across the world, becoming financially literate is an integral step in achieving an equitable environment. With in-depth consultations, women and men can build confidence in their financial transactions and build a network to secure their livelihoods.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the two-day conference, participants, and guest speakers alike, had the opportunity to discuss the state of affairs on women empowerment in South Asia from multiple angles. Participants were able to witness the success and change the past years of activism have brought upon society in South Asia but were equally reminded of the work that still lies ahead. With a well-rounded symposium consisting of policymakers, activists, researchers, and successful businesswomen, participants were encouraged to continue breaking with the gender norms of the past. At the same time, all were reminded that every individual carries a responsibility in transforming society into an equitable environment where women can thrive. The shared responsibilities in achieving this goal were equally reflected in the participant makeup of the conference. With roughly 40% male participation, we can register a trend that men are pushing alongside women for positive change. Furthermore, given that participants tuned in to the conference from 12 countries, the cross-border and international character of the plight for women's advancement becomes visible.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation Japan, the Regional Economic Program SOPAS, and TalentNomics India are satisfied with the outcome of this conference and are looking forward to not only the triumph and change the talented guest speakers continue to bring to society in South Asia, but even more so to see the impact and future success stories of our many talented, and bright participants in the years to come.

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