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WHY QUITTING SHOULD NEVER BE AN OPTION

While business leaders like Arundhati Bhattacharya, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw and Suneeta Reddy see changes at the workplace, there is still a long way to go to get women back into the workforce

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It's a known story. Women join the workforce in numbers, but only a few make it to the top. Many disappear from the workplace — giving up their careers after marriage, childbirth or simply inflexible work environments.

At a recent event in Mumbai, three powerful women took to the stage to talk about the importance of women in the workplace. And while pay gap and lack of opportunities may be some of the issues modern women face, the situation is far from bleak and companies are attempting to redefine the roles of women in big organisations.

Men as multi-taskers

According to Arundhati Bhattacharya, times are changing and improving. And in such times, we can also shower a little praise on men. Why? Because like women, they too have become better at multitasking.

"In the recent generations, we are seeing men becoming better multi-taskers. When I look at my younger colleagues, quite often I see that their spouses are more participative in the housework and looking after children," said the former SBI chairman, who was on a panel with Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, CMD, Biocon Ltd, and Suneeta



PIC: AFP

Reddy, MD, Apollo Hospitals Enterprise Ltd.

This wasn't something that Bhattacharya saw in her generation, as most women were brought up in households where men didn't do any housework. But despite the progress, Bhattacharya believes we still had a long way to go. "In India, it is still a given that women

are the primary caregivers," she explained.

Why women drop out

One of the key points on the panel was why women were quitting their jobs. Women in the workforce dropping from 43 per cent to 31 per cent across sections of society was a big area of concern for organisations.

Bhattacharya said that a survey her company conducted threw some light on the matter. "There were three times when this [women leaving the workforce] happened: The first is during the childbearing years and when the children are very small. The second, and this is probably only true



Kiran Mazumdar Shaw

in India and a few other Asian countries, is when children are between classes 9 and 12. During the coaching, it is supposed to be the mother's duty to chauffeur the kids around and be there with a cup of milk to wake them up. The third was when the parents or in-laws were sick, as in India geriatric care is very costly, so many people are taken care of at home."

A call for continuity

According to Shaw, companies need to encourage women to stay in the workforce by ensuring continuity of work. "You must have a set of HR policies that really look at these issues. We should try to make sure there is no loss of continuity. Today, more than ever, there is a strong focus on leadership development among women. We, as a company, are spending a lot of time grooming young women to come up the levels."

Shaw branded the tokenism of having one woman in the boardroom a "joke", saying, "In five years, we want a fairly balanced team in the leadership role. Today it is 20 per cent, but we are aiming at 30-50 per cent. We have archaic laws that need to be done away with. Our policies are gender biased. I would like new policies in

context of the new economy. The new economy allows us to come up with path-breaking policies for women."

Embrace yourself

While we still need to fix the rungs so the climb up the corporate ladder is smooth for women, Reddy thinks we should realise that irrespective of gender, we are all the same, but not be shy about bringing our uniqueness to the forefront.

"I think that all of us in today's world are so interconnected that we are able to choose careers that we are passionate about. We have to recognise we all have the same brains that a man does, but our perception is so unique and these create certain talents within us. And these talents are expressed through our profession. Women should find their passion," she said.

Shaw also shared some words of wisdom for working women. "Today, in any workplace, whether you're a man or woman, your competence and capabilities are respected. Women should be treated with respect and accepted as equal contributors. They need to have self-confidence. I advise young women to build this." •



Suneeta Reddy