



Yin Power

From being a minority in the workforce, women have come a long way. A *BT*-Vital Voices round table found they still need support to be active participants in economic growth.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHEKHAR GHOSH/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM

Get, set, go: The *BT*-Vital Voices round table participants

Women, who comprise half the world population, can be powerful force multipliers for economies. Yet their potential is almost never fully harnessed. A few weeks ago, Business Today teamed up with Vital

Voices, an NGO co-founded by Hillary Rodham Clinton, to debate issues that prevent a wider participation of women in the workforce.

The recurrent themes remained family and societal support, but it emerged that change, though hard-won, was here to

stay. The distinguished panel represented the breadth of geography and work areas. The panelists were Alyse Nelson, President and CEO, Vital Voices Global Partnership; Tara Thiagarajan, Chairperson and Managing Director of Madura Microfinance and Director, Microcredit

Foundation of India; Mu Sochua, Member of Parliament, Sam Raimsey Party (Cambodia); Pacita Juan, Founder, Figaro Coffee and President, Philippine Coffee Board and Bharti Gupta Ramola, Executive Director, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Co-founder, Basix. The round table was moderated by BT's **Shalini S. Dagar**.

BT: Let's begin with a provocative premise – is this the golden age for working women?

Tara Thiagarajan: I think this is a transitional era — a precursor to a sort of a golden era that I can see coming.

Bharti Gupta Ramola: For the first time in my lifetime, at least there is a convergence in politics, business and civil society on the importance of women. Globally, there is unprecedented access to education. We must forge ahead now, because soon there could be a backlash. There are whispers already in the United States to take affirmative action to admit more men in colleges. *The Atlantic Monthly* sometime back ran an article titled "End of Men."

Alyse Nelson: There has been huge momentum in the last three to five years. We are at that critical tipping point. There is a real opportunity, but we need to be very strategic about it. As Robert B. Zoellick, President of the World Bank, says: "Gender equality is just smart economics." Recent research also shows that companies with most women on boards outperform those with the least with an 83



"We need to be a little innovative in organisational structures"

Tara Thiagarajan (India), Chairperson and MD of Madura Microfinance and Director, Microcredit Foundation of India



"Typically, the attributes which are associated with a leader are considered male"

Bharti Gupta Ramola (India), Executive Director, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Co-founder, Basix

per cent higher return to shareholders on invested capital.

Mu Sochua: I think commitment is key — women to women and then engaging men at different levels.

Pacita Juan: Anybody who wants their business to succeed must listen to the customer and woman is a customer. My country has had two women presidents and many company CEOs. We have two women heads at Nissan and Hyundai and cars are such a boy thing. Our biggest telecom company is headed by a woman. We are lucky in the Philippines.

BT: Asia is not short of examples of powerful women. Is it however a class domination?

TT: Women have shown they can do it at the individual level. However, that does not translate into overall statistics. As a working woman, you always have a working spouse, but when you are a working man, quite often you have a spouse at home helping out. So it is just as hard for my husband to be in this kind of a partnership as it is for

me. Before I had my three children I had a lot of scorn for women-related issues. That has changed. This issue of working women as part of a dual working partnership applies to nearly 4,000 women in our organisation as well. Some of them are very ambitious and develop themselves as branch managers. However, geography often becomes a limitation. If you want to be promoted then you have to move. And women do not move their families; men do. Every woman who is doing this is finding a new equation but making a huge compromise in the process. Any structure which negatively affects your child's life and upbringing is a bad one. There has to be another way.

BGR: In the corporate context, it is now more of a joint decision than ever before. Lower down the pyramid, the challenge is no different. The changing dialogue provides some hope.

TT: Yes, the dialogue is changing, but it is still challenging for both the woman and her family. We need to be a little innovative in organisational



“When my husband married me, he married a full nation”

Mu Sochua (Cambodia),
Member of Parliament,
Sam Raimsey Party



“Technology can provide the answers. You can upload almost everything today except maybe mother’s milk”

Pacita Juan (The Philippines),
Founder, Figaro Coffee and President,
Philippine Coffee Board



“Businesses have huge power not just in terms of what they do internally but even externally”

Alyse Nelson (USA), President and CEO,
Vital Voices Global Partnership

structures and the way we handle relationships.

MS: Political life is very challenging in a sense. I am a politician from the grassroots and my husband is American. When my husband married me, he married a full nation. He is not just a shadow, he does not exist. I do not know what I will do when I become the Prime Minister.

PJ: We now have global families in a global marketplace. It is good if you are dancing together but there is a cost to it especially for the children. Maybe technology can provide the answers. You can upload almost everything today except maybe mother’s milk.

BGR: I am not sure whether this tension will not last. Most of us women around this table are the ones who have seen change within a single generation, practically. Our husbands, fathers, brothers, and friends, even the best men have not been trained in this way of life. The hopeful thing is many younger men understand that it is not just a woman’s problem.

TT: Having lived in the United States for 20 years, I can say India has some

unique challenges which need to be addressed for working women soon, like in the next five years. India has depended on the joint family structure and we have moved from that to nuclear families. The US, however, has developed very reliable institutional support. Here, there are no such child care facilities.

PJ: As an entrepreneur I see that as an opportunity. You can have special day care for corporate women like you.

BT: Should we leave it to the entrepreneurs or should we expect it from organisations that employ us?

MS: It has to be governments, families, society, organisations and entrepreneurs.

TT: The more optimal choices women have, the more they will decide to go to the workplace. If it were better, then a lot of women would cross that threshold.

BT: In the corporate context, women are under-represented in senior positions and in the boardrooms. Is that likely to change?

BGR: I think you will see a lot of

change in the next 10 years. There are a lot of women today in middle management. You typically need 20-30 years of experience for board positions. In India, at least, that pool is becoming larger.

BT: What are the actionable suggestions for change?

TT: It would be significant if men were more engaged in the process.

BGR: At PwC we have had a Gender Advisory Council and we have now decided to focus on men. We began by bias awareness training. Typically, the attributes which are associated with a leader are considered male. With the bias awareness training from top-down we are asking a gender question for everything. If a slate of people is brought to me for a position and if I do not see any woman in it then I ask for the reasons. You do that twice and the third time, it will not happen.

AN: We have laws on books but it is time to move from lip service to real action. Companies and businesses have huge power not just in terms of what they do internally with their employees but even externally. ♦