

Harvard Conference Women's Empowerment in Emerging India February 7, 2016

Good afternoon. Welcome to the Harvard Kennedy School. Thanks to Sanjay Kumar and the other organizers of the India Conference at Harvard for including a panel on the important topic of Women's Empowerment in Emerging India. (My name is Marty Chen. I am on the faculty of the Kennedy School and also Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

My whole career has been dedicated to the economic empowerment of working poor women in India and around the world.) It is my great privilege and honor to chair this session and to welcome and introduce our distinguished speakers.

Kiran Bedi

is a renowned police officer who joined the force in 1972, as the first woman officer and rose in the ranks to become Director General of the Police. She is well known for her "preventive and reformatory" approach to policing, particularly when she was Inspector General of Prisons in the early 1990s. After retiring from the police force in 2007, she studied law, earning a doctorate, and also wrote an autobiography of her career entitled "It's Always Possible". She is also a social activist running two foundations dedicated to education and empowerment of women and girls. Most recently, she entered politics.

Rahul Bose

is best known as a prize-winning actor and director and as a sportsman. But he too is a social activist and runs an NGO called The Foundation which seeks to promote education and reduce sexual abuse of children. He is also a global ambassador for Oxfam and has won many awards for his work in the films and for his social work.

Renana Jhabvala

is a distinguished social activist and national coordinator of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). She has worked for several decades with SEWA organizing working poor women in the informal economy and also promoting policy and legal reforms in support of working poor women in the informal economy. She is well-known around the world for her leadership on these issues and is the founding chair of several regional and international organizations of informal workers.

Before handing over to our speakers, I wanted to set the stage for our consideration of the economic, social, and political disadvantages faced by women in India today. I grew up in India and have worked in India since 1980. So I have seen many changes – child mortality has decreased, girls education has increased. But there are still many challenges in this domain. Let me share some basic facts from my own research: one set of facts about women's employment, the other about widows in India.

Women's Employment in India

the labor force participation rate of women in India is one of the lowest in the world:
only 29% of women over the age of 15 working

and 94% of all women workers are engaged in the informal economy - the highest rate of informal employment in the world
and 40 per cent of all women workers in India, outside agriculture, are engaged in private homes
30 per cent in their own homes - as home-based producers
and another 10 per cent work in the homes of others - as domestic workers

Widowhood in India

there are some 40 million widows in India
India is one of the few countries in the world:
where widows are expected to observe "perpetual mourning" for life
where there are child widows because of young age at marriage and taboos against remarriage
although their sons or their in-laws are supposed to take care of widows, I found in my field study of all ever-widowed women (562) in 14 villages in seven states of India, over half (52%) of the widows lived on their own or with other single women in what I call "female households" without adult males

Kiran Bedi – on women's political empowerment

- # 1 – what does political empowerment mean for women?
- # 2 – how has the reservation policy of 33% women elected leaders worked at the Panchayat and municipal level? What benefits have women enjoyed? What are the challenges?
- # 3 - what do you think about the national Women's Reservation bill? What benefits would it bring that the local level reservation does not bring? What would be the challenges?

Rahul Bose – on role of men, especially celebrity men, in women's economic empowerment

- # 1 - what does your NGO – The Foundation - do to address discrimination against women?
- # 2 – what is your role with the UN and with Oxfam in regard to women's empowerment?
- # 3 - how do you try to put your philosophy about men's role in women's empowerment into practice?

Renana Jhabvala – on economic empowerment of women

Note: she has already written her speech after discussing the themes with Marty Chen and Sanjay Kumar