

Field reports on gender inclusion

All Indian airports have segregated body-scanning security checks for male and female passengers. In most countries, this segregation doesn't happen — everyone walks through the same scanner gateway, and if further body scanning is needed, there are women security personnel on hand to scan female passengers, done out in the open.

At Indian airports, individual body scanning is done for everyone, using a handheld scanner. In the case of women, presumably as a special gender-friendly courtesy, this is done in a curtained enclosure, and the curtain at the entrance has to be manually opened and closed thousands of times a day. This leads to seriously more physical exertion for women security personnel than for their male counterparts — especially, as women now form a large chunk of air travellers across big and small airports.

It is no surprise that they do not get paid more for this extra work. However, what is surprising is that no one in the organisation has addressed (or likely even noticed) such a big pain point and designed a new system — or even a new type of enclosure — to eliminate what is clearly non-value adding, efficiency-diminishing, negative labour, done only by women security personnel.

Given that the handheld scanners are held at a respectable distance from the body and do not require disrobing or even displacing *dupatta* or a *sari pallu*, the enclosure can be dispensed with, without outraging modesty. A less daring but equally effective solution would be to undertake the simple job of redesigning the enclosure to keep privacy but eliminate the curtain. This columnist has often asked lady security personnel why they have not demanded a change. The stock reply is that they have often complained to their male superiors, but no one sees it as important. If this were a profit & loss-affecting business problem or a problem affect-

ing men, it would have been solved by now.

Added to this gender-unfriendly behaviour is that women passengers wanting to avail themselves of the separate, less crowded Digi Yatra security queues at some airports are told by male security personnel, “Madam, *aap ladies queue mein chale jaana, yahaan nahin.*” It's a bit like the old days when toilets were labelled Male, Female, and Executive (meaning men).

These are good examples of how many gender-friendly initiatives, with good intentions but poor and/or archaic assumptions, fail to deliver.



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For the longest time, Indian boards had none or maybe just one woman. Now, with laws mandating it, more attention is being paid to gender diversity, and the proportion of women is increasing, albeit slowly. After serving on many wonderful boards over the past few decades, it is a source of great delight to me to finally be on a large, listed company board where the majority of directors—including the chairperson and the managing director—are female professionals. This is the

board of Cummins India, the Indian subsidiary of Cummins Inc, a Fortune 500 engineering company (ranked 129), which also has a female Chair and Chief Executive Officer.

Do meetings of this board feel any different? Not at all. We just do what needs to be done and function in just the same way as any other board of equivalent stature and composition would. The discussions or dynamics at board meetings, or even at lunchtime, are not noticeably different. Yet, when Jennifer Rumsey, the global Chair and CEO of Cummins Inc, visited India, she wore a sari both to the “meet the Indian board” dinner and to a meeting with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar (his X handle features a picture of both of them). That one gesture spoke volumes and sent many mes-

sages! And to think my generation of women was once diffident about wearing saris to overseas meetings in the 80s and 90s!

An often asked question is how has the Indian boards scene changed after the new laws mandating women on boards?

What has been disappointing is the new and booming category of business called “women directors training”. There has never been an equivalent rush of “men directors training” in India before. Hopefully, we will see the rise of new initiatives aimed at helping board chairs build boards that are more inclusive in their functioning. The answer doesn't require reprogramming neurons, but lies in devising board processes that ensure that everyone gets the space to participate and be listened to, without a struggle. It shifts the onus from the individual to the institution.

The good news, though, is that the nomination and remuneration committees and board search firms are working harder to identify competent women director candidates, and the pool is definitely widening. The bad news, however, is that the bar is set higher when evaluating women candidates. The good news is that the ranks of high-calibre women independent directors with proven track records are growing.

Tailpiece: Chairperson is a phrase that now sits comfortably alongside chairman in many boardrooms, though it isn't always as gender-friendly as one would have thought. Years ago, a woman who was appointed executive chairman of a large public sector undertaking, when asked why she didn't call herself “Chairperson” explained that many of the troops in the company might think she hadn't got the real job but some watered-down version of it. The feminist cause was better served by calling herself Chairman and not Chairperson!

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