

Womanhood is mature, thoughtful, and responsible!



Commemorating International Women's Day, March 8, 2018, we feature in this issue an insightful conversation with Mrs. Edda Sehgal, cofounder, Sehgal Foundation, US, and S M Sehgal Foundation, India.

1. How would you define womanhood?

We should also ask, what does "manhood" mean? When a boy becomes a man, he hopefully becomes mature, thoughtful, and responsible. Womanhood should be the same way. When girls become women, we also become mature, thoughtful, and responsible. Women and men can each be strong individuals and changemakers within the family, in the workplace, in public life, and in every endeavor.

2. You are of German origin and you married a person of Indian origin, and you have witnessed both cultures closely. What have you noticed about how each culture is for women?

India and Germany are both patriarchal cultures but less so in Germany. Changes can be seen from generation to generation. When my mother was a child in Germany, she could not do anything without her father's consent. When she married, she had to have her husband's consent on important matters. This is no longer the case in Germany, but in India the situation is still similar to this, and in some cases worse, particularly in rural areas. A woman seeks consent from her adult sons and/or other males in the family. Another noticeable difference is that girl children are valued in the West, which has not been so true in India.

One of the first things I noticed in India was how Indian women are so giving, patient, and non-complaining—so much so that it seemed unreal to me. In Germany and the West in general, we complain a lot more about everyday inconveniences. In Germany everything is structured, planned, and orderly, but India is the opposite: you can plan what you want to do, but there will always be changes, variations, delays, and the thing planned may not even happen! Indian people seem to take things as they come and are so accepting, even to a fault sometimes. That is one reason change is very slow. However, both cultures appeal to me very much.

Germany and India have both been striving for gender equality and both have had women serve in the highest positions of government leadership (something the United States has still not accomplished). Some women in both countries have

achieved positions of importance at all levels in government, business, and commerce, so that women can do almost anything. In India's cities, women are living more independently, working, and enjoying more opportunities. Married women have equal say with their husbands; they don't have to do what they are told. But rural India is a different story. Women in rural India, generally speaking, are more isolated and have little say or economic power in the family or community. However, we are seeing this change in the villages where Sehgal Foundation is working. As girls receive life skills education, they are gaining more self-confidence, staying in school, and marrying later. Women who have received training in good governance are less timid and more eager to speak out and become involved in their communities.

3. You founded Sehgal Foundation, USA, and S M Sehgal Foundation, India, with your husband, Suri Sehgal. Please tell us about the vision you had for these philanthropic initiatives.

From my very first experience in India, I was impressed with the kindness and generosity of the people. I was warmly embraced by Suri's family, and it was very easy for me to love them. On my first visit to the rural villages I saw the severity of the poverty, the lack of drinking water, and the unhygienic living conditions—but the hardest thing to see was the hopelessness in the eyes of the women I met. Suri and I share a deep commitment to give back to his country of origin in a way that brings hope to these people. And we have seen this happen as girls and women are empowered.

4. You and Dr. Sehgal always say that there is a lot of power in empowerment. How have you seen this happening in the communities you extend your support to?

One of the easiest ways to see empowerment in action in the villages is when people are able to witness what happens when they use their own voices. For example, one of many methods used to teach the poor about their rights and entitlements to government services is to make them aware of their rights in the group meeting where at least 50 percent of the participants are women. Once knowing this information, they step up and ask for their rightful entitlements. When a woman, in particular, sees the positive results of using her voice for the betterment of herself and her family, she becomes empowered by the success. That ignites hope that can be seen in her eyes.

We have seen this often in the villages where we work. Women were hesitant at first, not speaking, just sitting to one side; but now women are more vocal, eager to participate and learn. The community radio station, Alfaz-e-Mewat, has also played an important role in this change. The radio programming is able to reach isolated women in their own homes. Women are encouraged to step out into the community and to use their voices. Women have taken on important roles in the running of the radio station as well.

5. What has been your source of strength in life? What inspires you the most in your journey so far?

My mother showed great strength and endurance in difficult circumstances, as did Suri's mother. I have been fortunate to have strong women role models, and I have always been inspired by the generosity and commitment of those who are willing to do what they can to help others who have so much less. Suri and I each had vivid experiences of hardships as children, as we were each forced out of the countries of our birth and became refugees. We each felt so grateful for those who helped us along the way, and we feel strongly about passing the same kind of help to others. When we established the foundations, we agreed that it was essential to make sure that all of the initiatives we launched supported gender equality and women's empowerment. As a result, women have taken the risk to speak out and voice their opinions. To be able to see women in the villages today using their voices, standing up for themselves, and making positive changes in their families and in their communities is continuously inspiring.

6. Share that one WOW moment of your life, which is still very close to your heart and you consider as your empowering moment.

I always had the greatest desire to see the world, particularly America. My wow moment came when my wish became a reality and I arrived in the US. My second wow moment was when I first met Suri. The smile on his face when he first looked at me is etched in my mind.

7. What is your message for women reading this who may have many responsibilities at home and on a professional level?

Women now have countless opportunities and many are taking full advantage of them as decision-makers and changemakers. I think any girl growing up today has wonderful role models to her right and left. We can each use our strength and our resilience to make constructive changes. My best advice to anyone is to be tolerant, kind, understanding, and strive to make a positive difference in the world.

(Interview compiled by Pooja O. Murada, director, Communications and Marly Cornell, consultant, Sehgal Foundation, US)