"Women are ready to make the sacrifice for their family; they are willing to make that call but that does not mean that they give up on their career. The thing about women achievers is that they are not afraid. They are willing to take the reins in their hand and start all over again if they have to, and if they are truly talented, there's no stopping them," she says. However, in order to achieve that greatness, women must be willing to be brave. "Raise your hand. Speak up. Let your opinions be known." That's Naazneen's mantra to success.

In a panel titled "Changing Female Perception in Society – Role that Media, Drama, Advertisement and Storytelling Should Play", theatre artist and Managing Director of Asiatic 360, Sara Zaker, stated that drama serials, especially those imported from India, exploit the position of women, showing them as either plotting, scheming characters or as forever weeping, insensibly sacrificing martyrs with no substance. Women are the forget audience of these shows and yet they show women in the worst light possible, thus defeating the purpose of female empowerment.



Kathy Tracey



Naazneen Karmali

"In my days, the transition in scenes of TV aerial would be shown through a certain action done by the character. So I was routinely asked to sit in front of the mirror and comb my hair, to portray my "femininity." But I would always refuse to do so. Instead, I'd take a book and pretend to read during the break in the scenes that required me to do routine actions," says Zaker.

Amer Wahab, Managing Director of Sirius Marketing and Social Research Limited, also agreed that women are often exploited in and by the media. There are lots of success stories on women but they fill up the special features sections of a newspaper rather than getting a place in the main pages. The media often tries to focus on women as mere consumers rather than decision makers and that, Amer argues, is not fair to them.

"Just take the example of an advertisement of a cooking oil brand. It's not the homemaker's skill that makes her food delicious but rather the oil that she uses that does the trick," says Amer with a shake of his head. ""Advertisements always portray women in typical roles and then give all achievement credits to the object being advertised," he adds.

You are a woman. You are not fit. You are way too old. These are some of the things Kathy Tracey had to hear when she attempted to row across the Atlantic Ocean with three crewmates. The end result? Tracy and her crew are the first women's four ever to row across the said ocean, and in fact the first women's four to row across any ocean. They were entirely self sufficient for the duration of the journey, which took them 67 days, seven hours and 20 minutes.

"The difference with me is that when people say, 'You can't do it,' a voice inside me says, 'Watch me," says Tracy in her session titled "The ABC to Victory," also the name of her book. Kathy argues that women need to instill in themselves a sense of confidence that will automatically enable them to achieve what they set out to do. She addressed a simple question to the audience, "Would you allow someone else to talk to your children the way you talk to yourself?" If women can't gather the courage and confidence to break barriers and answer the no's with a resounding 'Yes, I can,' they are being unfair to themselves and their potential to be the best she adds.

Kathy's ABC to Victory is acumen, bravery, and continuance. "Acumen is about developing, having and using insight and engaging in joined up thinking, Bravery is the concept that sometimes you just have to take a deep breath and go for it. Continuance is the driving and doing stage. To achieve a worth while goal we have to stick at it even when the going gets tough," says Kathy in her book.

Most panelists agreed that women in Bangladesh are wary of appreciating their work, thus suffering from a lack of confidence. While Syeda Rizwana Hasan, Advocate of the Supreme Court Bangladesh and Chief Executive of BELA, argues that women are still immune to corruption in Bangladesh and thus are much more capable of bringing about change, Mahtabuddin Ahmed, Chief Operating Officer of Robi, the telecommunications brand, says that the reason why women are lagging behind is that they underestimate their own quality and capabilities, preferring to believe social definitions instead.

Women's ability to achieve in the work force is no longer a topic for debate. The fact that they'd make for great leaders given the opportunity is also now accepted by most of the literate world. What we desperately need is a change in attitude; and that is not limited merely to the attitudes of the society but also our own perception of our capabilities and potential. Whenever you feel like you are all alone in the world, and start doubting your abilities, look at women like Sara Zaker, Rizwana Hasan, Naazneen Karmali and Kathy Tracey and take heart from their stories. And while you are at it, repeat Naazneen's mantra, "Raise your hand. Speak up. Let your opinions known." ■