

High-profile lawyer, champion of women's causes, mom. Cherie Blair talks about creating equal opportunities

The year is 1962. You are just an eight-year-old girl. You live with your working class parents in a small English town. And your father one day walks out. Your mother and grandmother step up to hold your world together but neither have great financial means. From then on, it is a make-do life. The question is, where do you take yourself from there?

How about to the London School of Economics? How about to topping class in your law examinations there?

Or, becoming one of the best known human rights lawyers in the world, good enough to sue the European Union and more recently the Royal Bank of Scotland for its alleged complicity in violating corporate governance norms that involves a multi-billion dollar class action suit?

And how about managing all that while being Mrs. Tony Blair, mom to three boys and a girl and also heading the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women that seeks to strengthen the capacity of women entrepreneurs in countries where they lack equal opportunities?

Ahead of her first major public conference titled "Women Mean Business" in Mumbai on December 11, Cherie Blair visited the Zen Garden and here are her views on a wide range of topics:

Are we seeing the end of capitalism and the emergence of a more just order?

I think we all hope for the fairer, better, more just order. I would say just from the observation that capitalism, like the common law system, has been endlessly adaptable. It is mainly because it's about individuals making choices and it's a cumulative effect of all those individual choices that gives it the flexibility to be adaptive.

What kind of world have you inherited and

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GUIDING PRINCIPLE
Men and women have complementary skills. They are designed to work together.

by Subroto Bagchi



FIGHTING FOR THE 'CAN DO' SPIRIT

what would you be passing on?

I think I was so lucky to be born where I was when I was, in England in the second part of the 20th century. My own mother and grandmother, having been born in England in earlier times, [didn't have] the opportunity of education that I had. And after that I had the opportunity to put that education back into practice! I happened to grow up at a time when opportunities were opening up not just for women but for men who came from ordinary backgrounds. I was very conscious that actually it was not the same all over the world when I was born in the 1950s, though it is a lot better in many places around the world in the 21st century, but there are still places... where frankly, being born as a girl is a big disadvantage.

There is no country in the world where women have the same opportunities as

men. One of the biggest obstacles to that appears to be what happens when you have children. We now need to devise a new way of working. We shall have both men and women to be able to prove themselves not as just actors in the workplace but as parents and for that matter, as sons and daughters in the home, where there is not just an obligation to the young but also an obligation to the elderly.

Tell us about the conference in Mumbai on December 11. Why have you brought the conference to India?

It is no doubt that in the 21st century, India is going to be the largest democracy and also a big player in the world economy. Because of that, for my Foundation, I want to do something slightly different in India. As, the first thing I was sure of was, not being in India myself, I did not want to

come to India and start saying, "I know what is best".

I also have met so many fantastic and successful women in India and yet, a vast section of women who are not successful at all and are still below the poverty levels. And then, there is this group of women... who are educated beyond the poorest and yet they seem to be in the same social situation as it was in the 1970s, around the same time as I was trying to break through into the legal profession. Lots of barriers! So, what could I do to help them? Because these people are intelligent, trained and talented and who can be real drivers of economic and social change.

You have championed the cause of not just women, but women entrepreneurs. Why is it critical for women, in a new world order, to start their own businesses and what kind

of challenges do you see?

Every nation's economy is driven by small enterprises growing into bigger enterprises, and the latter growing into still bigger businesses. So, we are refining categories all the time and realising that if we are going to generate revenues for many of these categories, you need targeted proposals. Some of these proposals would be gender neutral. When it is men and not women starting businesses, people say that this is just the natural way and that women don't do any business. I wouldn't accept that as a scenario.

When we partnered with the National Entrepreneurship Network in India, we went around the business schools and universities to encourage entrepreneurship, we were particularly trying to attract young women. In the course of it all, NEN realised that there were very few women

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Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs

than what they had expected. They themselves were saying, why is that? If young women don't see themselves as role models in higher positions, how do they become entrepreneurs?

We need to be encouraging women as well as men to take up entrepreneurship. For that, if we need to change how business gets done, we must do that.

What is your reflection on the state of world business?

I find it deeply disturbing that always intelligent men look around their boards to see so few women and they still think it's okay. I believe that men and women are not the same, they have complementary skills. Actually they are designed to work together. How can we then possibly be in a place where that fact is so poorly reflected in the boardroom? ■