

# India Abroad

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## From Life of Silent Dependence to Success

Republic Day gathering focuses on Indian women's emergent independence

By Aziz Haniffa

**O** — WASHINGTON, D.C. n the occasion of India's Republic Day — a celebration of the day the nation's constitution took effect — both India and the U.S. were called upon to become international leaders in the move toward the empowerment of women — against sexual harassment, abuse and interdependence.

"Because of the status of Indian women today, there is a critical need for silence-breaking," said Frank Islam, a Washington-area entrepreneur-turned-philanthropist, in his keynote address at the area's Jan. 28 Republic Day celebration. "This silence-breaking should not be about sexual harassment but about an invisible socio-economic system of barriers, obstacles and limitations that prevents Indian women from learning, advancing and achieving their full potential. This is true especially in terms of business ownership and entrepreneur-

ship. out of the 77 countries. In a 2017 MasterCard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, ranking countries based on an assessment of women's advancement outcomes, knowledge assets and financial access, India ranked 49 out of 54 countries, he said.

"I firmly believe," he said, "that we can harness that 'untapped potential' by working together to move Indian women to a state of interdependence." The keys are education, enlightenment and



Frank Islam, left, the keynote speaker at the D.C. India Republic Day celebration, with Dr. Sambhu Banik, center, co-ordinator of the program and Ashok Batra. The Jan. 28 event was held at the Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Md.

entrepreneurship, he said, and they are intertwined.

"We as Indian-Americans with a love for our motherland and our own mothers have an obligation to reach out to assist the public and private sectors in India in providing the appropriate education at the primary school level to ensure the necessary foundation for empowerment of women," he said.

Enlightenment as well, he said, comes through higher education.

Entrepreneurship, he said,

is not necessarily limited to business — it can occur in all fields and professions.

"The development of women entrepreneurs in all of those fields will ensure multi-pronged progress in terms of the pursuit of interdependence for women across the board. We need to encourage and support this development," he said. After providing women with the education they need to venture into entrepreneurship, we need to "ensure adequate financial resources to support their entrepreneurial

ship."

He noted that various studies have shown Indian businesswomen are underpaid, undervalued and exploited, with entrepreneurship remaining a male bastion. He said a recent study by the National Sample Survey Organization found that only 14 percent of Indian business establishments are run by women — and that some 79 percent of them are self-financed because most of those businesses receive little support from financial institutions.

"These are bothersome findings," he said. "Even more bothersome is what is discovered when the status of Indian women entrepreneurs is compared to that of woman entrepreneurs around the world." A 2015 report from the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute noted that India was near the bottom of its Female Entrepreneurship Index ranking countries with support for women's business development. India ranked 70

ventures, and provide mentoring to promote success in the entrepreneurship." Venture capital is one avenue, he said, and mentoring is another.

"Unless they come from a family that has a business or have worked in a business, women entrepreneurs have seen no role models and have had no coaching on how to start, run and build a business," he said.

"Let us together make India and U.S. leaders internationally in the empowerment of women."