

'Rich perceive poor as lazy drunks'

Sharmila Ganesan-Ram | TNN

Mumbai: "The poor are the only people who repay their loans regularly," said Dr Deepa Narayan, as running noses and undernourished faces beamed in background visuals. However, Narayan, a former senior advisor to World Bank for Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network, has seen that the privileged still perceive the poor "as lazy, not smart and drunks". That mindset has to change, stressed Narayan, during a recent panel discussion at the American Center on 'sustainable solutions to getting out of poverty.'

The host for the evening, Anand Giridhardhas, a columnist with International Herald and New York Times, introduced Narayan as "someone best known for subverting the World Bank by not always looking at things from the vantage point of GDP and macro economics." Along with her in the "all-women power panel", were Shobhaa De who, Anand said, "writes four columns a week which makes her eight times more productive than me" and



HSBC country head, Naina Lal Kidwai, took part in the panel discussion on 'Sustainable solutions to getting out of poverty'

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The discussion kicked off with findings from a recent World Bank report authored by Narayan titled, 'Moving Out of Poverty'. "Hard work is the one reason why many have moved out of poverty," she has stated in her report. The 0.8% poverty reduction rate of India, Narayan said, is an average that hides a lot. "If one set of people are doing things and moving out, there's another set falling into poverty." With our "overdesigned" policies, she claimed, "we resist letting them make their own decisions and leap out of it."

The rural woman, felt Kidwai, should be provided with facilities like water, electricity and leisure time—a concept that's alien to rustic housewives. Kidwai cited how one can "bring corporates and NGOs, which otherwise distrust each other, together to help rural women farmers.

Shobhaa De refuted both views with her rhetoric. "I don't think we perceive the poor as drunk or stupid. We take poverty for granted perhaps in a positive way. At least, the poor are not invisible here as they are in China."

She blamed the status quo on the Indian philosophy "that

poverty is almost karmic" and begged for the need to stop seeing systems in a "smug and academic way" but at a more "human" level. In the course of her study, Narayan found very few respondents thought poverty was their fate. "The need is to make poverty everyone's problem including the middle-class," said Narayan.

De recommended education as the way to long-term progress while Kidwai stuck to her belief in financial inclusion of rural women in banking. Narayan, on the other hand, called for identity cards for those below poverty line and support from those in "positions of privilege."

At the end, when the discussion was thrown open to the packed hall, charged up audience members raised various questions ranging from "Why are we not addressing the root of poverty which is government policies?" to "Where is the money allotted for 'Jowar yojana and power yojana' going?" The panel was also asked to describe what the society without poverty looked like. Scandinavia, with its balanced people-to-resources ratio, came closest to the Utopia.

Prashant Nakwe