India has reinforced its commitment to improve the lives of women and girls by initiating large, innovative programmes and new funding since 2005. However, inequality and discrimination are still pervasive particularly in India’s poorest states. The World Economic Forum’s 2012 Global Gender Gap Report ranks India 105th out of 135 countries. The private sector can play a significant role to improve the lives of girls and women by developing new products & services for the benefit of women, providing a safer work place and investing in initiatives related to safety, health and hygiene and education and skills that benefit girls and women.

Acknowledging the gravity of this issue, UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) in partnership with NextGen, India’s leading Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Sustainability Management Company, is creating a multi-stakeholder platform to facilitate collaborative action on issues related to the Safety, Health, Education and Employment (S.H.E.) for women and girls.

As a curtain raiser for this initiative, DFID and NextGen, organised a Google+ Hangout Session on ‘Engaging Businesses for Improved Safety; Health; Education and Employment for Girls and Women’, on 20th March 2014 from 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm (IST) with distinguished panellists:

- Mr. Mark Lowcock, Permanent Secretary, DFID
- Dr. Bhaskar Chatterjee, Director General and CEO, Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs (IICA)
- Ms. Frederika Meijer, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Representative, India and Bhutan
- Ms. Naina Lal Kidwai, Country Head, HSBC
- Mr. Amitabh Choudhry, Managing Director & CEO, HDFC Standard Life
- Mr. Rohit Adya, Director External Affairs, Vodafone India

Mr. Lowcock initiated the conversation by stating that the new Companies Act 2013 has changed the CSR scenario for India. Under the new Companies Act, 2013, passed by Parliament in August 2013, profitable companies must spend every year at least 2 per cent of their average net profit over the preceding three years on CSR works. This mandatory CSR-spend rule will apply from fiscal 2014-15 onwards.¹ The engagement of the private sector in CSR activities is being viewed as a game changer for the developmental landscape of the country. He mentioned that organizations such as DFID and UNFPA must reach out to the corporate sector with options for investment in gender equity programmes that are both - replicable and sustainable. He clearly stated that investing in girls is not just in the interest of girls but for society at large. He envisions that partnerships under S.H.E. would help develop products and services that would offer better access and better choices for girls in India.

Ms. Meijer affirmed that this conversation was well-timed. She shared details on UNFPA interventions on delaying marriage and childbearing. She emphasized the need to help develop the health, social and economic assets of both ‘in-school’ and ‘out-of-school’ girls. She mentioned that Life-Skills Education would empower girls to make strategic decisions choices and take transformative decisions. She also stated the importance of support networks and safe spaces for girls. She mapped the role of the private sector whereby core competencies could be leveraged to benefit those who need it most.

Ms. Kidwai shared experiences in strengthening capacities of micro-financing institutions. She mentioned the need to impart both skill-based education as well as financial education. She also envisioned the need for collaboration among corporates. She spoke of sharing the volunteering space wherein employees take pride in social work.

Dr. Chatterjee stated that the new legislation ushers in a new wave of thought that would help eliminate gender-bias across levels. It offers an opportunity for the corporate sector to use innovation to get close to the communities. The involvement of the private sector brings three key strengths:
1. More bang for the buck
2. Leadership in execution
3. Innovation for transformation

Mr. Choudhry mentioned that donating money for philanthropy is easy. The real challenge lies in taking the solution not just to the hundreds but to the many thousands who need it. He mentioned the valuable role of the government, multi-laterals and other donor partners in integrating the component of up-scaling for new social initiatives.

Mr. Adya categorically stated that what is good for society - is good for business. He spoke about the Vodafone Foundation in India that leverages mobile technology in the four areas of m-women, m-education, m-health and m-agriculture, to drive social change.

The event shed light on the pillars that make up S.H.E., existing projects being implemented by corporates and multilaterals that focus on these pillars, potential initiatives and projects that a company can undertake individually or in collaboration with other companies. The discussion rounded up with Ms. Meijer reiterating the UN’s ability to act as a bridge among sectors to help bring projects to scale. She also highlighted the UN Secretary General’s vision of strategic involvement of the private sector in setting the post-2015 agenda. At the end of the Hangout session it was evident that though the speakers belonged to different sectors they shared the same vision – one that of a more gender equal India.