

Mrs. SGC's speech - Women's Graduate Union- International Women's day (14-03-2019)

Good evening - Thank you my dear Bina for inviting me here today. It is indeed a great pleasure to be here- I am coming after decades and last came with my aunt Jai Godrej one of the earliest graduates of Bombay University, and who also held the post of President all those years ago.

The subject of empowerment of women is a burning issue all over the world. Women's empowerment and gender equality are essential for our society to ensure the sustainable development of any country. We know it is the key to economic growth, political stability and social transformation. World leaders, experts & scholars alike are giving their voice to this critical endeavor.

As Kofi Annan the 7th UN Secretary General said "there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women". So then, why isn't this happening on a mass scale? Astonishingly, the exact opposite is there on the ground. Rather than uplifting & empowering girls & women as the most important tool for transformation & progress, horrific violence is perpetrated against them every minute, every hour, every day.

Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities.

Around the world, the achievements of women are being celebrated on International Women's Day which began way back in 1911. But the day also highlights the work that remains to be done in order to achieve gender parity.

The theme for this year is Balance for Better- encapsulating the idea that a gender balanced world benefits everyone, economically and socially. And it's up to everyone, men and women to make it happen.

As per the following statistics by the Observer Research Group- a think tank based in India, there are huge differences in the types of inequality faced by women in different parts of the world- from cultural representation, to domestic burdens & child marriages. A thought here- does anyone ever quantify and pay for soft skills like empathy and creativity? India has made significant economic progress in recent decades, including increasing G.D.P per capita from 1990-2015. But this economic growth has not been accompanied by progress towards women's equal economic participation. The country's female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) stands at just 27% compared to 96% for men. The global average is 49%.

Current research reveals 4 primary factors that help India's low and potential declining FLFPR: (Female Labour Force Participation Rate)

1. The pervasiveness of entrenched patriarchal social norms that hinders women's mobility and freedom to work.
2. Rising household incomes that create a disincentive for labour market participation among women.
3. The disproportionate burden of unpaid work & unpaid carework on women, and
4. The lack of quality jobs for women reinforced by gendered occupational segregation and a significant gender wage gap. On average, 66% of the work done by Indian women is unpaid compared to 12 % of men's!

Women's access to decent paid work is an undisputed ethical and economic imperative, as well as a primary human right and aspiration. Indeed, the participation of educated, capable women in the workforce makes for a strong economic argument. The International Monetary Fund finds that India's GDP will increase

by as much as 27% if women participated in the economy at the same rate as men!

There are enough examples to show how vital products, services and facilities have traditionally been designed BY men FOR men. Seatbelts for example have been proven to be less safe for women as crash test dummies were designed after men. Female drivers are said to be 47% more likely to be seriously injured in a car crash. Medicines too, are tested predominantly on males, despite evidence that women and men differ in their risk to, and response to, medical conditions. This bias is built into people's daily lives.

At the same time the female consumer has never been considered a growth market beyond cosmetics, even as companies are now acknowledging the rising she- economy.

At present, only 14% of business in India are run by women and only 12 % of members of the national parliament are women!

It is also critical to explore how gender dimensions come into play not only when women are workers, but also when they are employers. And very often, women help women!

Empowerment is a process. Through the process, an individual becomes an agent of change. More simply put, it's the "can do" factor, going from "I can't" to " I can".

A global survey done by a not- for-profit organization- 4 GGL " 4 Girls Glocal (global/local) leadership" targeting today's millennial women, showed that more than ever before, today's young women have more choices in education, but the least in career choices. The question is "what do women want to change most in their lives? The answer was their career & income followed by personal development (physical, mental & habitual)

“Who contributes the most to creating this change?” More than 60% identified themselves. Family & government were a distant second- 18% & 15% respectively. Friends were the least contributing factors.

Now the critical question: For those young women who become agents of change – how did this happen? A staggering 46% replied “self-awareness”, a process of knowing “who they are” This was followed by experience, & education was a distant 3rd!

This is revolutionary- Given that girls education is the main focus of what is funded in today’s girls’ empowerment work, it is time perhaps to rethink our strategy & action around the world. This is not to say that girls education isn’t important or shouldn’t be funded. It is to boldly challenge conventional assumption on what empowers girls & young women and the kind of education imparted to them especially in musical schools. It is also to invite partners in more data collection and to scale this endeavor. Astonishingly, there are No Laws in India mandating equal pay and equal access to the workforce and here’s another eye opener, -22% of Indian working women own life insurance policies as opposed to 83% of working men! And 36% of Indian companies polled said they didn’t want to hire female workers because they prefer male employees.

Foremost, it is a call to action to support girls & young women in self-actualizing their inner power – empower- to truly leap frog women’s empowerment. The next generation of empowered women leaders and change makers will transform our world.

What is indisputable, reinforced by 4GGL’s global survey is that violence against girls & women is the single most important issue to millennial women. It is the greatest moral tragedy of our time and we must take action now to end it. A partnership of men and women, each bringing a different perspective to the table would be the ideal and best way forward to help improve lives on our planet today.

Women should grab every opportunity and make opportunities for themselves- as we know women have to work twice as hard as men to be accepted.

I really admire young women like our Bharati here- Bina's daughter, for the opportunity that she has made out of forming her own company in the field of education against many odds.

So it is clear that for technology to be empowering, prevailing socio-cultural norms must be addressed.

But we must do better, we need a new playbook, one that moves beyond target quotas for women, sponsorship of women and women's development programmes.

Ofcourse, while these remain critically important, they are insufficient. The new playbook needs a clear focus on men: their development as inclusive and equality minded leaders. We need policies and cultured interventions that support men as equal partners at home and in the work place

The new playbook, should be one that focuses on 3 specific interventions that can lead to rapid progress: improving talent systems, driving equality-based policies and practices, and setting new expectations for what leadership is and how it is developed. We need a world that favours highly collaborative leaders who thrive in fluid, distributed and non-hierarchical organisations.

The work place of the future will demand a different type of leadership with inclusive cultures that build tolerance, allow for direct and open feedback and ultimately build trusting relationships.

I would like to conclude with this powerful quote- its by an unknown author and its goes like this: "Here's to strong women, may we know them, may we be them, may we raise them."

Thank you!