

Dear comrades,

Its my pleasure to greet you all on International Womens Day.

Today is an occasion to mark, to observe, to acknowledge, to appreciate and to salute the wonderful roles that women play in making this world a habitable, liveable, lovable place of living. We see women as scientists, politicians, doctors, software engineers, advocates, financial analysts; in media, fashion, entertainment, tax administration, police, sports, business management, industry. In every field, we have stellar examples of women achievers.

This is not an easy journey to start, or to continue.

As a tiny fledgling bundle of joy, eager to emerge into this world from the mother's womb, girl children in many households still suffer from the existential threat of female foeticide or infanticide. It's not a coincidence that there are only 940 females in India for 1000 males (2011 census). As she grows up, quite often, not only in rural areas but in urban too, girl children are deprived of education. Unrelenting education campaigns are yet to weed out the stigma in many households about educating girls. Even if the stigma is dispensed with, if there is a boy child and a girl child in a family that can educate only one of them, boy is sent to school. In lower economic strata, girls are looked upon as home keepers, and domestic help supplements, or petty employable commodities, for petty wages, even from their childhood. They are subjected to abuse and violence. Even in upper economic strata, in homes, in societies, in media, in films, girls are victims of wrong stereotypes.

In spite of such deprivations, disadvantages and discriminations, it's amazing that girl children, from all kinds of economic strata, braving many odds, have grown into achievers, in different fields, trailing a blaze of success.

President of Intel India, IBM India; Chairmen/CEOs/ MDs of SBI, ICICI Bank, Axis Bank, Standard Chartered Bank, Cap Gemini, Britannia Industries, Wockhardt Hospitals, Lupin, National Stock Exchange, CRISIL, LIC; Country Heads of Morgan Stanley India, Facebook India, Hewlett Packard India, Diageo, Bank Of America Meryll Lynch, Accenture India are all women. Women scientists played a major role in the historic ISRO's 104 satellite launch. Our sportsmen who saved the blushes in Olympics are sportswomen – PV Sindhu, Sakshi Malik, Dipa Karmakar. 19 women got Padmasri's last year. Women have arrived to claim their rightful share of achievement. We need to celebrate their achievements. Project them. Make them icons of inspiration, for generations to derive energy from.

At the same time, we should be aware about the vast sea of women who are still shackled to the pathos of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of opportunities for a sustainable livelihood.

I saw a picture in a newspaper – a village bus stand – two grown up daughters along with their father / mother, about to board a bus. Father was a farmer or a wage earner, who lost his livelihood. They are migrating to city, in search of livelihood. The picture haunts me – I wonder – what happened to that family, those girls – in a city which is new to them, a city where they have to find a place to live, find work, with no resources to bank upon. What if they couldn't? This is not the story of the girls in the picture alone, this is the story of thousands of girls from families ravaged by poverty, loss of livelihood; cornered, uprooted and thrown into an unknown arena of exploitation. As I think more and more about it, it makes me agitated more and more, to fight for the safeguards that women should be guaranteed – the most important being the right to education. Women should be enabled with education, with skills - with employable skills -at various ages and stages of life, so that they are endowed with the skill-set to earn decent livelihood. To save themselves from exploitation.

The task doesn't stop there. Once women gain employment, they should be endowed with right to equality, right against discrimination in workplace. Women should be assured dignity of labour, equal wages, beneficial facilities and additional safeguards which compensate for their lack of level playing field. These safeguards and benefits should be made statutory, institutionalised, and implemented thoroughly. Because these are the safeguards that we have achieved through ages of fighting. We should make relentless fight for safeguards that we are yet to achieve. We should be very vigilant. Because there will always be attempts to mock, sneer, and trample on the safeguards and the genuine benefits that we rightfully deserve.

In this context, I am reminded about an interview given by Anima Patil Sabale, a scientist – astronaut select, working at Intelligent Systems Division at NASA Ames Research Centre. She said : *I wake up at 4 am everyday, cook lunch, pack lunches for everyone, lay out breakfast and clothes for the boys and then come to work. After I leave work, I travel for an hour to get home. My boys come home from school then I can help them with their homework, do the dishes and start cooking.*

This is the story of everyone of us. Whether we are an astronaut in NASA or a scientist in ISRO, or a researcher in DRDO or an auditor in AG's office or an Inspector in Incometax or an executive in a bank or a clerk in Civil Defence or a staff member of Indian Post or an announcer in AIR, or a surveyor in Geological Survey; name any job, any cadre, in any department, the story is the same. A woman is always an eco-system, balancing multiple roles, multiple commitments, at multiple places of work – both in office and also at home. There might be CL, EL etc in office, but there is not a single CL or EL in house. Good health or bad health, the tasks of bringing up children, and other home-making works don't give any break. These realities necessitate the additional safeguards.

Comrades, we have travelled a long road, but we also have a long road ahead. Women need to be in more leadership positions, women should stand up as role models. Women should help other women grow, and women should form a strong bond of unity.

This day is a reminder of the road ahead, the enormity of the tasks that still stare at us. This day is a day to resolve, to rededicate ourselves to the task of women emancipation and empowerment.

UNO declared the campaign slogan as “Women in the changing World of Work : Planet 50=50 by 2030’, for gender equality. The theme for this year’s International Women’s day is rightfully coined as “Be Bold for Change”. On this occasion, as Chairperson of the Women’s Committee of the Central Government Employees and Workers, I call upon everyone to join hands and give a clarion call – Yes, we will make it happen.

Believe in yourself.

Sd/-
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