

Smt. Smriti Zubin Irani – Keynote Address

At the outset, I would like to understand does the SDG5 connect with the beneficiary and the people that you hope to impact.

I personally in my journey in a district called Beed in Maharashtra met women who said that we have this doctor here and he is infamous for only one reason. You go to him, you tell him that you might be having a girl child, he will check you and then he will help you drop the baby and the police will never find out. And the doctor was so successful that people not only from the district but districts around them would flock to this clinic. And when a female journalist asked why is this doctor never caught, they said there are two reasons, a) there is no woman who will report him b) there is no evidence, so how do you convict him?

She took it upon herself along with a girl who she knew, who is pregnant at that time and went to visit the doctor as a part of an undercover investigation. She asked the doctor, *lagta hain Lakshmi ji hain*. Doctor said, don't worry I will check her out. He checked, did the ultrasound, he said, yes, it is a female foetus. The female asked, *kya karna hai*. He said, put 3000 bucks on the table, it is done. The journalist said, I am extremely fascinated, *Aap ko dar nahin lagta?* He laughed. He said, *Nahin, nahin, intezaam hai*. I have made arrangements to dispose of the foetus right here in the clinic. She said, *Kya intazaam hai, can we have a look so that we don't get into trouble tomorrow*. Very joyfully the doctor takes them to a room and opens it up. It is a bit dark and he says, why don't you peep in, that is where I have made the arrangements. He had tied dogs in that room and he said, the minute I finish the process, the procedure, I throw the foetuses so that the dogs will eat up and there is absolutely not a shred of evidence that the police would find against me.

So when we talk about SDG5, when we talk about women's rights, when we talk about the basic right to live, those are the issues that we hope to address first.

Now my request is that when we approach through all the dignitaries who are here today in this national consultation, any goal, have we ever humanised that goal for people to connect with. No matter how many years you have spent in the field of empowering women as Ashok ji calls it, the doctor story did make you flinch. The depravity did outrage many of you here. But what is fascinating is that even when a consultation begins, we talk about the need to

empower women and our entire process then is driven by that thought that women need empowerment.

We don't. We just need what is ours. So how much of our approach gets skewed by this position that we take that I have to go empower somebody. What we have to do is to go and inform somebody that these are the processes, procedures through which what you legally, constitutionally deserve shall be yours. Does that approach change our engagement with those who we seek to benefit? I think so. Because when we talk about this need to empower, when we talk about an international goal, the first thing that we need to resolve for ourselves is that we have these rights enshrined in our own constitution. We belong to a culture where women were not the lesser half's. Nowhere in the world do you have this Kalpana of ardhnarishwar where a religious text, where a society in itself said, man is incomplete without a woman who is his equal. How much of that have we leveraged in terms of a thought process when we go and talk to beneficiaries, when we go and talk to people at large.

Now in a country where we talk about doctors who are giving female foetuses to dogs to eat, what was the condition between 2009 to 2014. We have an Act, PCPNDT Act which penalises, in fact, jails people who try to determine the sex of a child but how many convictions did we have. Between 2009 to 2014 there were 206 convictions all across the country whereas the data said that millions of girls never saw the light of day. So what is it that on one hand sees a very strict law which assures conviction. On the other hand, the same country sees girls dying in the mother's womb.

Now there are some people who had this bias, and I will call it the bias, that this is only happening in the dusty, rural lanes of India. It is not. Evidence says that south Mumbai which is one of the most attractive districts in the country financially, that had the highest measure of female foeticide. That is a district which paid obeisance to the rich, the influential, the educated. Now pray tell why would girls die in such a district. And the only one state that came in everybody's focus was the state of Haryana. And we started measuring every death of a girl as compared to every boy who was allowed to live. What is the difference? The difference was how the law, the act was implemented. Now between the same 2009 to 2014 people, Haryana saw only around 54 convictions. Being a state which had the history of being the worst off in the sex ratio, only 54 convictions.

But the honourable prime minister launched the national programme of Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, and for the first time in the last two years, in the history of the state of Haryana, the sex ratio now is 950 girls as compared to a 1000 boys. And when you look at the FIR's filed, when you look at the convictions, you had in a state which had only 54 convictions in close to 6 years, in the past 2 years around 430 FIRs.

So I don't know whether there is any representative of the Home Ministry here today. But they should have been. Because when you crack the whip of the law, a lot of changed circumstances present themselves.

Arvind ji was very right when he said that education is going to make a huge difference in how we increase wages for women, how we close the wage gap between men and women but when you talk about education, what is the biggest challenge we face. Arvind ji rightfully said that when you look at women Sarpanches we see that the HDIs in those areas where they have female administrators is much better. Why? Because they are socially, morally, ethically, emotionally inclined to ensure that the funds are well spent, to ensure that there is enough done to alleviate poverty, to ensure that there is social justice. Why? Because they carry that extra chip on their shoulders. They are already deemed to fail. So the only way that they can make a mark in the history of the establishment they are serving in is to make sure that the reports that come out are flawless so that every number that is checked by somebody after they demit office is a number that awes the person who follows. That is a legacy every female administrator seeks to leave behind.

But when you talk about women's leadership roles in administration, is it only about Sarpanches, MLAs, MPs. Our law provides for leadership opportunities for women even in the most basic of services like education.

Arvind ji spoke about the Sarvashiksha Abhiyan. According to the RTE, school management committees are to comprise of 50% women. Do we address that challenge ever? Can you imagine a lady being a part of an SMC, her child and those children around her homes going to that school and she becoming a part of the decision-making process? Are the teachers coming on time? Is the learning outcome level achieved by her child and those in the classroom of the children that she knows? Whether the midday meal is being prepared properly? Those are the very basics of leadership that can empower women to take control, not control but actually serve in positions which will have a huge social impact.

Now there is a UNDP report of 2001 which talks about energy poverty. We always speak about rural women, they don't send them to school for studying, they are sitting at home, they want to marry off the daughter. That is a presumption. But when you look at the UNDP 2001 energy poverty report you will realise that women are compelled to keep their daughters back home to fetch firewood and do other home activities. And it becomes then a systemic problem because generation after generation sees only the women doing that work. How many of us have ever seen a boy going and fetching firewood? That is because she has seen her mother do it, her mother has seen her mother do it. So it becomes a part of our psychology, it becomes a part of the process that we are intertwined with.

So when the prime minister launched the Mudra Yojana scheme, when the prime minister launched the Ujjwala scheme, what are the changes that we are hoping to impact.

Let us talk about the Ujjwala Scheme. 85% according to statistics before 2014 of our traditional rural households depend on traditional energy fuels and resources. Now the prime minister launched a very very ambitious project that in three years we will ensure clean fuel to close to 5 crore women who are in the BPL category. It is miraculous that in one year we have reached a target of 2 crores. How is that possible? Because women and families are now coming up and asking for that right because they know that the prime minister has assured it. But when you look back in my introductory remarks, when I talk about humanising the target, what is the first thing that the prime minister did. He did the 'give it up' campaign. And he told the citizens of our country that if you can afford to give up your subsidy, please do so because you will help benefit a family, specially a woman who cannot afford clean fuel. Close to 1 crore people gave up their subsidies. Now no politician ever tells people, let go of the money that you receive from the state. Every politician would love to give you some more dole so that you keep being fascinated by that politician, keep engaging with that politician, keep supporting that politician.

But what we have seen at the top of our leadership is a politician who says, we have a historic opportunity, let us come together and fix some challenges which have been really troubling us for a number of years. So now what happens when families receive clean fuel. Those households which are now not dependent on collecting firewood would possibly look for another opportunity for the girl child and possibly ensure that they go one round higher in their educational pursuit.

But when a girl does reach the age of puberty, firewood or not, she says I can't go to school because I have a problem, we have no toilets. So how do you address that. One could never imagine a prime minister standing at the Red Fort and saying, *Auraton ke liye toilet banana hai* (We have to make toilets for women). That was never a part of our public conversations. Who talks about it? Nobody. He did. And he set one goal for his administration. He said, we know our schools which do not have a toilet separately for girls, can we in one year atleast ensure that those toilets get built. I had the privilege of building them.

But what did we do? He spoke on the 15th of August, on the 17th of August we had all our data out in the public domain and we appealed to people that this is our data, it is bound to be flawed, can you help us correct it. Can you visit the school which is there on our website and genuinely tell us whether the toilet is functional or not? People helped. A lot of our data got corrected. But once we corrected that data, how do you approach downstream to ensure that the work is done and that too in a limited period of one year in a nation of a billion plus. Every state government, every collector got involved. Normally when government of India functions, one department does not complement and put entire work forces into another department but that is what happened in government of India.

Not only were toilets built but once built, we requested officers across government of India, could you help us go down to that district, that school and actually check whether what they have built is true or not, correct or not. Officers went because it became a part of a mass movement between people, officers, politicians, everybody came together. Why? Because we just wanted to clean toilets for our girls to go to school to.

Now how do you get to the next round. You go with the success stories. A proud success story I have is that of Shopian District where girls, the minute we had these toilets built, they said, we are enrolled, we are going to the next class and now we want to pursue higher education.

So Arvind ji spoke about quality of the job, quality of age. I had the privilege of visiting the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre and I was extremely fascinated, three or four years ago, I said how many women are there in the administrative staff and how many in scientific staff. They said administrative staff has 75% women, scientific staff has only 25% women. Why? Because the progression of girls post high school into STEM is only 22%. Now why does that happen? The normal refrain we hear from people is *ladki ka maths weak hai* (The girl's

maths is weak). The problem is that maths when it is fundamentally taught, those are the ages where the girls is struggling to be in school. So can we ensure that they go on to areas like STEM also because not only the wage but the quality of the job and the quality of the wage matters. Can we ensure that we address how our girls can get into STEM more and more? I mean if ISRO can launch 104 satellites and we have a lot of women there, I would want their tribe to grow. Not at the expense of men as Arvind ji said but genuinely grow only on the basis of the quality of work that they bring to the table.

Women don't want handouts. We don't want this turf war between men and women. We don't enjoy it. We smile about it because that has become the standard joke now. We just want to be where we are on the strength of our own capacities. We don't want a handout. And that is why they become easier targets to engage with. They don't want a comfortable life. They are already predisposed to struggle. That is a genetic flaw that women have. We are ready the minute we step on this earth to struggle, to meet our challenges. But those challenges are aplenty.

So when you talk about addressing how to achieve the SDG5, as Hardeep ji said, for SDG5 and this UN agenda to be successful, India has to succeed. But do so not only because you want the UN agenda to succeed but because you want India to succeed. And go out there not to help women but you just tell women that the law facilitates their rights, the law facilitates their growth.

I am extremely grateful that Arvind ji, you gave me this opportunity. I am hopeful that the national consultation will bear fruits which are beneficial for women across the country. Thank you.