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India must lead in bringing women to the forefront

Dr Shailja Vaidya Gupta has done her PhD in Biochemistry from Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. She is currently Adviser, Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology. She formerly worked with office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India as Senior Adviser.

At Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology, she was handling International Collaborations and was responsible for establishing active bilateral collaborations with Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland, UK and US and with the EU.

Dr Gupta was also responsible for DBT's collaborations with Non-Governmental Organisations such as Wellcome Trust, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO), PrakashLab, Stanford University, Nobel Media and Cancer Research UK.

Dr Gupta has been instrumental in developing the Clean Barapullah

Drain project in partnership with The Netherlands, Denmark and Afforest; Bringing Foldscope: the low-cost microscope developed by Prakash Lab, Stanford University to India and Indian schools & colleges. She also organised and established the Nobel Prize Series 2017 and 2018 in partnership with Nobel Media.

One of the first workshops on "Edutech and EduGaming: The future of Education" to promote e-learning was organized jointly with Finland in 2017. She has also helped establish the concept of "FarmerZone", a single window cloud service that will offer curated data solutions leading to improved farm productivity and market connectivity for smallholder farmers.

At the office of the Principal Scientific Adviser, Dr Shailja Gupta was responsible for the PM-STIAC Missions on Waste to Wealth, Deep Ocean Mission, COVID-19 Response and Science outreach. She is also handling the National Research Foundation (NRF).



TO describe my ‘successful’ journey is the ask from the editor, and when I look back on my journey, I realise it is embarrassingly unspectacular. I am from the privileged class, especially the privileged women class. I was given the best education available, supported by parents who believed in educating the girl child — I underline the girl, because my parents emphatically believed, especially my mother, that girls more than boys, need an education and preferably an education in the English language; to be financially independent for the girls was critical. They, my parents, were also unusual, as marrying their daughters was never a priority.

With education came many privileges and with economic independence and a government job at that, comes much respect and autonomy. It is, therefore, from a position of privilege that I write.

Did I face gender bias during my journey? Yes, I most definitely did, irony being the biases I faced were as much from women as from men. Centuries of indoctrinated gender roles and gender expectation make unconscious biases difficult to shed.

How do I manage work/life balance? How can I travel when I have young kids to take care of?? etc. etc. Questions which men are never asked, have been thrown without much thought or even awareness that the questions were not quite right. These gender expectations also play on a woman’s mind and she may not be able to give her profession as much attention as she would want. The “guilt” of neglecting the family is very high. These biases, conscious and unconscious have adversely affected professional ambition of many women, globally, as they have mine. It’s a continuous battle, things will change but slowly.

The change required is, of course, social and cultural, which is a big ask. However, there are some policy changes which will definitely go a long way towards gender equality and inclusion. These policy changes may also accelerate the cultural and social attitudes towards women, and here are my suggestions:

1. There should be mandatory representation of women in all high-level committees, get as many women as possible into these committees; not just science committees but across the spectrum — governance, policy, economics, etc., the

diversity of thoughts is crucial and enriching in developing holistic policies.

2. Allow child-care leave to male officers in the government structure. The child care leave rules enforce gender roles. Please note, here I talk of child-care leave and not maternity leave, maternity leave is to fulfil a biological role while child-care leave is designed to fulfil a gender role. We, women, need to protest against such policies, even if we benefit from them.
3. Women make for 50% of the work force and contribute to nation building both economically and socially. Support in terms of fiscal, legal and technical needs to be provided to women, going beyond tokenism. It is important to acknowledge women’s contribution to nation’s development, the silent, hidden figures, barely acknowledged and rarely celebrated:

- Women farmers
- School teachers
- Nurses
- Women working in unorganised sector
- Homemaker

The percentage of women working in the agriculture sector is as high as 84%. Women make up about 33% of cultivators & about 47% of agricultural labourers & caregivers to farm livestock. Yet when we think of a farmer, the image is of a man. This needs to change. Laws for women to be legal farm holders and rights to the earnings from the farm should be considered. Monthly stipends from MGNREGA to these unacknowledged women farmers must also be explored.

India owes its literacy to its school teachers; almost 70% are women. In the most unreachable village of the Himalayas to the remotest anywhere else in the country, a woman school teacher is holding the fort. School teacher is the foundation on which the future of the country rests. Upskilling training modules of school teachers and special scholarships for the most brilliant must be introduced, as also reflected in the National Education Policy.

Nursing is the only profession where a man needs to be qualified as a male nurse, backbone of any hospital. No matter

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how bad a doctor, a good nurse normally makes things better; add ASHA workers, our primary healthcare rests on these strong shoulders. Again, fellowships and scholarships for both the qualified nurses and ASHA workers must be introduced. These fellowships should allow the best nurses to go for training in the best national or international hospitals, similar fellowships must also be constituted for ASHA workers who can train in the best hospitals in the country and may also qualify to be paramedics with higher pay-scale.

Women working in the unorganised sector, hard back-breaking work. Beedi making to carpet weaving are the most exploited workforce, laws ensuring the minimum wages, on par with wages for men, must be enforced.

Stipend for women who protect Indian arts and crafts, the artisan, embroiderer, the plethora of embroidery, various painting forms in India must be considered.

For the homemaker, singularly responsible for bringing up conscientious and committed citizens, social and societal respect must be accorded.

When a nation acknowledges women as contributors to a nation’s growth and development, by institutionalising rewards and awards as recognition of their invaluable contributions, we move from mere tokenism to acceptance of the fact that women are the cornerstone of a civilised, progressive society.

India must lead in bringing women to the forefront in the growth of our nation, it can be the role model for the world when it comes to acknowledging the importance of women in their intellectual and work capacity. The diligence and detailing which women bring to the table must not be ignored. A nation ignoring the strength of 50% of its workforce does so at its own peril.