

Her Story, My Story

Why I am hopeful about gender justice



**By Droupadi Murmu
President of India**

On Constitution Day last year, I was delivering the valedictory address at the celebrations organised by the Supreme Court of India. Talking of justice, I thought of the under-trial prisoners and then could not resist speaking at length about their plight. I spoke from the heart, and it made an impact. Today, on International Women's Day, I want to share some thoughts with you in the same spirit – straight from the heart.

Right from my childhood days I have remained perplexed about the status of women in society. On one hand, a girl child receives so much love from all around her and is even worshipped on auspicious days. On the other hand, she learns very soon that the possibilities open before her in life are fewer than those available to boys of her age. On one hand, a woman is respected for her innate wisdom, even appreciated as

the central figure of the family who takes care of everybody. On the other hand, she has a limited role, if at all, in nearly all significant decisions about the family or even herself.

Over the years, as I stepped out of home, first as a student, then as a teacher and later in social service, I could not help but wonder about such paradoxical attitudes. Sometimes I felt that as individuals, a majority of us recognise men and women as equal. However, at a collective level, the same people impose limits on a half of us. During my lifetime itself, I have seen most individuals progressing towards the notion of equality. At the social level, however, old customs and traditions, like old habits, linger on.

This is the story of all women around the world. Every other human being on earth begins life with a kind of hindrance. In the twenty-first century, when we have achieved unimaginable all-round progress, many nations are yet to have a woman as the head of the state or head of the government. At the other end of the spectrum, unfortunately, there are places in the world where even today women are considered lesser human beings; where even going to school can be a question of life and death for a girl!

This was not always so. In India, there were times when women were decision-makers. Our scriptures and our history talk of women known for their valour, scholarship or administrative skills. Today, again, countless women are of course contributing to the nation-building in their chosen fields. They are heading corporate firms and even serving in the armed forces. The only difference is that they have to prove their worth in two domains – they have to excel in their career and also in their homes. They do not complain but all they expect from society is that it reposes confidence in them.

This leads to a curious situation. We do have a healthy representation of women at the grassroots level in various decision-making structures. But as we go up in the hierarchy, we see fewer and fewer women. This is as true for political bodies as for the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the corporate world. What is noticeable is that even the states with higher

literacy rates display the same trend. It shows that education alone does not guarantee financial and political autonomy for women.

Therefore, I firmly believe that the social mindset needs to be changed. The deeply ingrained gender prejudices must be identified and purged to create a peaceful and prosperous society. Conscious efforts have been made to promote social justice and equality. But these steps have not proved adequate to ensure gender representation. In education and jobs, for example, women lag far behind men more because of social conditioning than any design.

In a number of convocations I have attended in different parts of the country, I have noticed that women, if given a chance, often outperform men in academia. It is this indomitable spirit of Indian women and our society that gives me confidence about India emerging as the torchbearer of gender justice in the world.

It is certainly not the case that one half of humanity has had any head-start by keeping the other half behind. The fact is that this mismatch is hurting the whole of humanity, because the two wheels of its cart are unequal. Not only economic progress, but climate action too would speed up if women are included in decision-making. I am sure that the world will be a lot better place if women are made equal stakeholders in the progress of humanity.

I am, indeed, hopeful that the future is bright. I have seen in my life that people change, attitudes change. That is indeed the story of our race; otherwise we would still be living in caves. The story of women's emancipation has proceeded slowly, often painfully slowly, but it has proceeded only in one direction and has never made a U-turn. That is what gives me confidence to believe, as I have often stated, that the coming Amrit Kaal up to the centenary of India's independence belongs to young women.

What makes me hopeful is the fact that we as a nation began with a sound foundation of gender justice. About a century ago Mahatma Gandhi's campaigns during the freedom struggle encouraged women to

cross the threshold and step out into the world. From those days, our society as a whole and women in particular have aspired to build a better future. Prejudices and customs not favourable to women are being done away with either through legislation or through awareness. This seemed to have positive impact as Parliament today has the highest number of women representation. Needless to say, my election as the President of the world's largest democracy is a part of the saga of women's empowerment. I believe the spirit of "innate leadership in motherhood" needs to be invoked to promote gender justice. A slew of government programmes to directly empower women, such as 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao', are steps in the right direction.

We should also appreciate the fact that societies take time to match step with the best of progressive ideas. But societies are composed of human beings – half of them women – and it is up to us, each of us, to hasten the progress. Thus, today, I wish to urge each of you to commit yourself to one change, in your family, neighbourhood or workplace – any change that would bring a smile on a girl's face, any change that would improve her chances of moving ahead in life. That is one request, as I said before, straight from the heart.