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Gender-Wise

International Women's Day: CHECK



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The stage is decked. The women are dressed in festive colours. The institutional head tells them how deep the commitment to women empowerment runs in the organisation and its promoters. Awards are distributed to women who have served the organisation well. Prettily wrapped packages are distributed to all the women present with a single red rose and a smile. An older woman sits on stage, a smile plastered to her face, waiting to be introduced and invited to speak. She is the woman achiever who will deliver an inspiring speech shortly. She too receives a parcel and a bouquet of several roses. She has done this so many times that no one guesses that her heart is sinking: another plaque or curio? The smile stays put.

How do I inspire people when my own heart is filled with despair? I have done this for forty years. In the last ten years, there is so much more awareness about gender, gender equality and gender violence. Since the awful night that young girl was gang-raped in Delhi. That awareness has taken the strangest forms.

Ritual observance of International Women's Day, which has journeyed from socialist advocacy to capitalist marketing. Summits on women empowerment with all male-panels (that perfect neologism, 'manels'!). Ditto, "Women Achiever" awards, judged by manel juries. TV soaps that reflect some change (old relationships, new ways) but where the modern girl is always aggressive till love tames her. And filial piety still rules, although now oppressive elders might sometimes reform. But everyone still meets somewhere in the middle to hold up patriarchal structures. This far, no further.

I wonder if my old friend gets to watch television sometimes in prison. Stop, stop. Go no further.

More roses, more speeches, this time in honour of the institutional head and promoters. As I write this, it is just about two years since the first COVID-19 lockdown. The anger and shame I felt when we saw the images of migrant workers walking home in the cruel Indian sun rise once more. I shove them back. Yes, I keep them alive because we should not forget. Gendered consequences. All those men, abandoned, forlorn, walking back to complete uncertainty, possible starvation. And in their midst, young girls and women. Parents dropping

dead. What happened to those girls? When I go home, I should Google. Someone must have investigated. The organisation that works on trafficking perhaps.

The shadow pandemic. Why the rise in gender-based violence during a crisis came as a surprise to anyone is what surprises me, or anyone like me who has worked... in the real world, not just on violence and inequality. This is the way of the world. Not a shadow, but a mirror. To everything we have failed to do. Forty years for me, many more for others, centuries for the women's movement. And still, we do not have enough shelters or support services. Our help lines are largely ineffective or inaccessible. Few organisations help with recovery and rebuilding survivor lives. And we are unable to focus on more than one form of violence at a time. So after the Delhi gang-rape, it was rape and sexual assault. Now, it is domestic violence.

But gender-based violence takes a hundred forms, and like Raktabeeja's ability to self-propagate, new forms are innovated all the time. During the pandemic, not just domestic violence, but child marriage, forced marriage, incest rape, child sexual abuse and elder abuse have also become more common. We have been so ineffective. The work of our lives rarely adds up.

I must not cry. I must not let my eyes moisten. "Our chief guest is so moved by your words, Sir." I force a smile to my face. "Your support for women empowerment will go down in history."

I am the missing apostrophe-s. You have forgotten about me. "Women empowerment" makes no sense. Yes, I know you know and have written articles about this, but really, without me, the apostrophe, "women" and "empowerment" are two unrelated nouns placed inelegantly next to each other. Women'S empowerment, if you must. The empowerment of women. Without me, the apostrophe-s, you make no sense.

Oho, do you think this is a pesky, irrelevant, irreverent intervention in your consideration of serious matters? What will you next lose—the 'e' in 'mpowerment'? Or the 't', which will actually allow you to speak the truth—'empower men'?

Alright, I will shut up. After all, I am just an apostrophe-s.

"Madam Chief Guest is now smiling. I will now introduce her."

What I worry about is a retreat of women from public spaces. The lockdown meant thousands of women who work in public spaces—construction, street vendors, small business owners—were forced inside and their precarious livelihoods collapsed. They had also kept safe, through their watchful presence on pavements and in markets, the young girls who walked back from school and the young women who got off buses and rode their motor-cycles to work. Together, they had made the streets a safe place for women to come out in protest. And from these protests, emerged our women leaders. We have recoiled, been made to recoil, like snails and tortoises, into our unsafe shells. How long before we reclaim our right to public life? Those massive women's protests seem a distant and hazy memory as we quickly backspace and rewrite history.

My heart is so full of grief and despair that my head is blank. But now, it is my turn to rise and inspire. Where's that cache filled with a lifetime of Women's Day clichés?

“Friends and sisters, the observance of International Women’s Day was intended to create solidarity for better working conditions for women labourers, for the right to vote, and for peace. I say to you, one day is not enough. No, no, not the way you mean. Not for roses or attention. But the work we are meant to do must be done all year long.”