

SHE

Women's empowerment should be the norm round the year, not just on Women's Day



MINU BUDHIA

'How and why do we empower women?'

That we even have to discuss this in 2022 is not just food for thought but fuel for action. While most of us are discussing solutions that can be an answer to this question, some are unfortunately still debating the need for it. Women are intrinsically powerful beings with immense mental strength, capable of being unstoppable if they wish to be. It's just that thanks to the dictates of society, they haven't been able to wholly get in touch with their inner powerhouse. They need to get that sense of freedom, that feeling of empowerment, that aha moment that awakens the inner strength, the 'narī Shakti' that was always there, but suppressed by societal mores, conventions and stereotypes.

The heart-breaking thing is that not only do many women not know their own strength, but also there are many who do not support women blossoming to become their own person and tapping into this inner power. So what's the first step? Inspire, educate, encourage yourself and empathise with the women in your life. Be both an example and a support system. We have no idea whether someone is battling with diagnosed or undiagnosed issues like anxiety, depression, OCD or phobias.

The equality equation

For me 'equal' or 'equality' is about equal opportunities. I'm not in competition with any man and I don't want to be a man. Men and women are different — to use a cliché, from Mars and Venus. Both have different strengths and weaknesses. We do not want to be the same, but we want the same opportunities 360° and 24x7.

I feel every challenge is an opportunity and every opportunity is a challenge. This applies to both men and women. However, for women, almost every opportunity and advancement is in the form of a challenge due to gender stereotypes that follow women around like that cute little dog from Vodafone's ads.

Empowerment via self-care and mental health

An important step to empowerment is re-evaluating the way we treat ourselves. The first thing to do is to realise that you can't pour from an empty cup. There is a difference between self-care and selfishness, and we need to realise that one does not equal the other.

Women by nature are nurturers



and often tend to put self-care on the backburner. This needs to change. When trying to become financially independent, women essentially end up working 24x7 — at the office and at home. Burnout isn't going to do you or your loved ones any good, so make yourself and your health a priority. And this includes your mental health as you can't achieve your potential if you're exhausted and stressed round the clock.

We women are also great at criticising ourselves, ignoring our mental health needs. Monitor and edit your internal dialogue, try to focus on what you do well. You don't have to be perfect.

Every step counts — simple self-love steps

All change begins from within. And it begins with self-love. Because when you truly love and value yourself, that's when you stop the negative self-talk and start implementing positive solutions. Here are a few non-cliché, easily doable micro-happiness steps to make yourself a priority without feeling selfish about it:

- # Go on a holiday with your female friends only. Solo trips are also super fun.
- # Every day, make one food item that you really love, not just your family's favourites.
- # Don't try to be a superwoman.
- # Don't feel guilty when you have opted to work while your children are young.
- # Don't let that fancy table mat, crockery, cutlery wait for any special occasion. Every day is special. Celebrate LIFE.
- # Dress to please yourself, not others.
- # You may have ups and downs in your mood or energy levels — it is perfectly ok not to be ok.
- # Don't stop loving yourself, even for a single day.
- # Train your son like a daughter and your daughter like a son. Expect daughters to prove themselves in life,

**SHE:
FOR
YOU,
WITH
YOU**

just the way we expect from our sons.

- # Take care of yourself the way you care for your family. Don't postpone that important health check-up.
- # Make time for ME time.
- # Check items off your bucket list.
- # Confidence is the sexiest accessory you can wear.
- # Watch a film, visit a new cafe, have brunch, go on a long drive with your favourite classic songs playing, read at a library, go on a staycation/vacation and more — all by yourself. This helps you realise that alone and lonely are not the same thing.
- # Every morning as you wake up, list three of your strengths.
- # Every night, right before you go to bed, list three physical attributes that you think make you beautiful.
- # Every year, make sure you learn one new SKILL.

Micro entrepreneurs

Whenever I visit exhibitions across the country, especially smaller ones, I'm amazed by the innately enterprising nature of women. With whatever little that they have, in terms of both materials and training, they create beauty out of next to nothing at all. Running micro businesses from their homes, they are found across cities and towns, in every nook and corner. These women, mostly homemakers, are trying to carve out an identity for themselves. And many of these women are doing so at a later stage in their life to cope with empty nest syndrome. Now that's what I consider empowerment.

The case for working

A friend of mine, like me, got married right out of school and soon after had her first child. She then completed college and soon after had her second child. A happy homemaker from a traditional joint family background, a couple of years later she decided to get a job. When I asked her why, she shared the story of a random

conversation when she asked her husband for a few thousand rupees and the reply was, 'do you even know the true value of this amount; what it takes to earn this amount?' And while he said it nicely, it was at that moment she realised the value of financial independence and how undervalued her non-monetary contribution at home was.

Homemaker is a profession

A young colleague of mine, who is engaged to be married, was discussing her future plans with me. When she said she was going to take a two-year break, I asked if she was being pressured by the in-laws and how she would cope with 'doing nothing' all day.

The answer surprised me. She said it was completely her own choice. She had been working for over a decade, right out of college, and wanted to take some time off to enjoy herself, reconnect with her hobbies, travel, and nourish her relationships. Plus, she also sweetly reminded me that being a homemaker is a profession too — just as demanding as a job, just with no official pay. And the support that a homemaker gives to their spouse is priceless, so she is equally, though indirectly, aiding in the family income and thus entitled to a part of the income as a right and not a favour from her spouse.

Invest time in investing — literally

An entrepreneur cousin of mine and I recently ended up talking about investments. While she runs her own business, she said she finds the idea of investing a headache and has no interest in it as her husband or brother take care of it. I feel financial independence and empowerment does not stop at just actively earning money. We need to learn to manage it. And just saving money doesn't count. Investing is an essential life skill as you must have a passive source of income too. You need to spend 15 minutes every day reading or watching videos to understand the basics of investment. Also, it's never too late to start.

How to be her REAL man: tips for men

- # Be a partner not a husband.
- # All she wants from her partner, dear men, is to be respected and valued.
- # She has been raised as the apple of her family's eyes with much support and love. Yet after marriage, she is expected to manage the home and office equally. Understand and feel this.
- # She is expected to compromise — whether coming home early, doing chores, giving up her friends — and most do — without any fuss. Realise this.

- # Behind a successful woman there can be a man too.
- # Surprise her with bed tea / dinner dates / a whole day out.
- # Celebrate her birthday the way she likes.
- # Actively listen to how she spent her day.
- # Take an interest in her activities.
- # When she shares a problem, sometimes she just wants you to listen — not solve it.
- # Plan couple dinners with her friends too.
- # Respect her family as you do yours.
- # Value her each day, because she is worth it.

Workplace equality

When you look at the many reasons that women do not join, or opt out, or do not return to the world of business and commerce, it's not a lack of ambition, but a variety of obstacles that cause women to distance themselves from the workplace. When faced with daily obstacles to their advancement, many women lose their confidence and belief that they can achieve their goals.

Obvious and not so obvious gender biases linger in the workplace — whether it's the lack of positive mentor/mentee relationships, sexist language, off-colour jokes, exclusion from important meetings or discussions, sexual advances, unsupportive bosses who have a hard time believing that women know how to do their job,

reporting managers who block opportunities as they feel threatened or insecure, mansplaining, or a strong, ambitious woman being labelled as headstrong — the prevalence of bias is undeniable.

What women are looking for is equal opportunity — not only an equal chance to compete for a corner office or a c-suite title, but also the equal opportunity to be able to give their careers their best shot, to give it their 100 per cent without feeling guilty, to work without emotional baggage or emotional blackmail.

Empowered women empower women

Every drop in the ocean counts, and the change begins with women supporting the women in their lives. Encourage women you know to achieve their life and career goals. Work together and not against fellow women to get a seat at the table. And in the workplace, root for the women with ambition and drive. Cheer for them when they succeed. Don't give into jealousy or insecurity. And on your way up the corporate ladder to break glass ceilings, don't forget to mentor young women trying to do the same. And this is especially important for female entrepreneurs. As a leader who is uniquely qualified to understand her female employees, uplift them by providing equal opportunities and turning their



EVERY DROP IN THE OCEAN COUNTS, AND THE CHANGE BEGINS WITH WOMEN SUPPORTING THE WOMEN IN THEIR LIVES. ENCOURAGE WOMEN YOU KNOW TO ACHIEVE THEIR LIFE AND CAREER GOALS. WORK TOGETHER AND NOT AGAINST FELLOW WOMEN...

perceived weaknesses into strengths.

Reconnect with your true self

Indian women are raised to be good daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, grandmothers. Our whole identity is based on our relationships with the loved ones in our lives. We've never been taught to be good to ourselves, or to answer the question 'Who am I?' or 'What do I want?'.

An excellent example of a woman identifying her self-worth, reconnecting with herself, and regaining her self-confidence can be found in the film *English Vinglish*. As Sridevi's character

grows before our eyes, two things played important roles. One, she took charge of a problem and decided to take positive action by enrolling in a class. Two, she had supportive people who believed in her — like her mother-in-law, her younger niece, and her English teacher, who termed her an 'entrepreneur' and uplifted her in her own eyes.

Why do I share this example? Because Sridevi's character finds her true identity and her Ikigai — her true purpose or her reason for being. I share it to ask you to be a proactive woman who recognises her own value and self-worth, even when others don't see it.

#BreakTheBias

Women comprise multitudes within themselves and do not always have the opportunity to be themselves unapologetically. This year's theme for Women's Day is #BreakTheBias and I want to encourage you to not only challenge external bias but also internal bias. Challenge yourself to

do better not for yourself, but for the girl you were as a child. Dedicate this day to realising your dreams. Join me in dedicating this day to yourself. Because the day we understand, accept, and assert ourselves by believing in ourselves and channelling our true power, half the battle will be won.

I dedicate this day to the 18-year-old me who had stars in her eyes... to the me in my 30s who lost her spark for a little while... and to the me today who has fire in her soul, hope in her heart, and determination in her veins. I am more beautiful for having been BROKEN. It has been quite the ride and I cannot wait for what comes next. I wish you all the confidence and support to make each day your very own Women's Day. You deserve to celebrate yourself not just on one official day, but every day of the year. Happy Women's Day!

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, ICanFly, Cafe ICanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@caringsminds.co.in