

## “GENDER MAINSTREAMING”

Namaste and greetings from the people of India. It is an honor for me to be among you today.

In my brief address I will take you through a quick journey to understanding the issues related to “Gender Mainstreaming” from both the Indian and global perspectives.

On the cold statistical side we have half the world population constituting one third the labor force, earning a mere one tenth of the global income and putting in two thirds of all working hours.

Imagine a woman working for 4 hours to gather firewood and then doing the housework and child care. This is not the problem – this is Life. The problem is beyond statistics and is a nightmare world of dominance, exploitation, violence, rejection, destitution, loneliness, depression and the complete erosion of self worth. The question before us today is not how we got ourselves in this mess but how do we get out of it. How do we successfully “Gender Mainstream” the world in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In India we have a dualistic situation. For nearly five thousand years there has been a celebration of the feminine force in a metaphysical way similar to the central theme of the bestselling novel “The DaVinci Code”. Let me explain.

The Vedas are hundreds of thousands of verses composed by Indian sages between fifteen hundred BCE and seven hundred BCE. In the Rig Veda (circa.1500BCE) there are verses singing the praise of many Goddesses. Aditi is the Mother of the Gods, Devamatri – free, unbounded, upholder of the cosmic order.(think of Isis of Egypt, Ishtar of Babylon, Cybele of the Greeks) There is Prithivi , the Earth Goddess, generous and the equivalent of Gaia, the Greek Earth Mother. Saraswati is the mother of the Vedas, Goddess of wisdom, learning, science and music. Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth, prosperity, love and good harvest. We also have the powerful concept of Devi – womanhood, feminine mystique and power, best symbolized by the Goddess Durga. She was created with the strength of all the Gods and she exudes the force of the purest form of energy. Against this backdrop of worshipping the feminine force, we had a sage named Manu (circa. 1500 BCE) who composed an exhaustive thesis on society and how best to run it. His views on women are chauvinistic in today’s world but understandable in 1500BCE. Manu dictated that a woman should be in the care and protection of her father

in childhood, of her husband in adulthood and of her son in old age. The dualism of the status of Indian women was clearly established.

Goddess or chattel. Worshipped or ignored. It is a powerful legacy which holds us captive even today. It also explains how in a totally male dominated society, Indira Gandhi could rule as prime minister with complete acceptance of her leadership.

Unfortunately for India there have been too few Goddesses in real life. The three and a half millennia that have followed the “Laws of Manu” have taken their toll on our women and left them as second class citizens in desperate need of “Gender Mainstreaming”.

Our present day activities for “Gender Mainstreaming” in India owe a large debt to three social reformers who swam against the tide of male dominance. They need to be remembered today.

Rammohan Roy was a powerful intellect in early 19<sup>th</sup> century British India. Strongly influenced by Mary Wolstoncroft’s (1792 CE) book “Vindication of the Rights of Women”, he was a crusader for women’s emancipation. He propagated widow remarriage, women’s education and tried establishing the concept of womanhood over wifehood.

Swami Vivekananda India’s most revered modern day monk was another social reformer. He tried improving the downtrodden status of Indian women by invoking the Earth Mother concept I have spoken about. Vivekananda’s late 19<sup>th</sup> century voice was a strong plea for the empowerment of women.

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of modern India, was a diehard change agent. He fought against the concept of child marriage and for women’s rights. Gandhi also experimented with the Yin and Yang concept of human nature by trying to awaken the woman within himself.

As an Indian woman propagating “Gender Mainstreaming” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century I would like to pay homage to these three voices of reform.

We have now arrived at the doorstep of postcolonial India. The British have left. Free India charts her course with a unique Constitution. I say unique because it also serves as a document of social change. Articles 14, 15 and 16 provide equal rights to all men and women. Women have the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to

move freely and earn a living. The right to inherit property came in 1956 through legislation. The real thrust came in 1993 with the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments that give women one third of elected seats – a definite impact on the participation of women in the democratic process.

India has seen a spate of legislation, statutes and government policies that are targeted at “Gender Mainstreaming”. Let me mention just a few.

- The National Commission for women (1992) safeguards women’s rights
- The National Health policy gives highest priority to programs relating to women’s health
- Special programs in the education sector have helped to increase women’s literacy and reduced the gender gap in the school system.
- The Gender budgeting concept was emphatically implemented in India’s national budget 2005 – 06 where it was specified that 30% of funds must go to women related sectors.

Yes we have made some headway but the problem is enormous. It is also a fact that mere Legislation and Government Schemes do not lead to change. So what causes change? I will place three factors that I define as “solution providers” for any society attempting “Gender Mainstreaming”. One is macro and two are micro by nature.

The Macro factor and my first “solution provider” is Democracy. We in India firmly believe that real change and true empowerment can only come through a proper functioning Democracy. No alternative exists.

The Micro factors and my second and third “solution providers” are education and economic self sufficiency. It is education that creates an awareness of women’s rights. Economic self sufficiency is the fruition of that awareness implemented in action. Respect from a male dominant society comes grudgingly with economic self sufficiency. In India we would be utilizing these two strategic change levers with governmental support and increasingly larger role being played by non-governmental organizations in actual implementation of our schemes.

Going beyond the Indian experience, I would like to address the why of “Gender Mainstreaming” in a holistic manner. Most women think that the purpose of “Gender Mainstreaming” is to right a prevailing wrong. Most certainly, but there is also another powerful dimension that needs understanding.

In 1974 Françoise d’Eaubonne defined “Ecofeminism”, as a philosophy born of an union of feminist and ecological thinking, a social movement that regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected. It does not promote domination. It is inclusivist and values care, trust and friendship. The 1979 Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulies added an extra dimension. Various studies are leading to the belief that societies which respect their women also treat nature well and vice-versa.

The Himalayan “Chipko” movement in India was a living example of Ecofeminism.

My point here is that “Gender Mainstreaming” will not just right a wrong but also make our world more harmonious, caring and ecologically friendly. A worthy new beginning for mankind.

In closing let me give you the words of Miyamoto Musashi who said, “When you have attained the Way of strategy there will be not one thing that you cannot understand. You will see the Way in everything.”

We, the women of today need to attain the Way of Strategy to “Gender Mainstreaming” so that the way will be in everything we do.

**Thank You.**

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