

## Women and Education

### Introduction:

Good morning to each and every one of you. I want to begin by congratulating all the women gathered here as we meet for this webinar to celebrate Women's Day. In truth we are meeting to celebrate and share the lives of women for being who we are. In the words of the famous French Physicist, Dr Marie Curie, "We must believe that we are gifted for something, and that this thing, at whatever cost, must be attained". In the context of the theme of today's webinar, we need to highlight the lives of certain Women who made a mark during the time of this pandemic by their undaunted spirit, their life of service, determination and daring to be the first.

Remembering some of our Heroic Women:

24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 will forever be etched in our memories as it was the beginning of a change we would not have imagined, when suddenly the entire Nation went in for a complete lockdown. As the Nation geared to face the unknowns of Covid-19, who were the first to sacrifice their time and energy, their vacations with family, and who had to put in long hours of work without minding the danger to their own health and their families? These were and are Warriors: the frontline health workers mainly the Doctors and Nurses, a majority among whom were women.

The ones we need to celebrate next are those who dared to be resilient and courageous amidst all odds and perhaps the ones who were the worst affected are the poor migrant communities. They not only lost their means of livelihood, but were forsaken by all those who they served, they had to walk hundreds of kms to their rural homes. Even old women walked and walked, tired and worn out, pregnant mothers delivered their babies on the roadside.

- A young girl from Bihar Jyoti Kumari all of 16 years of age, cycled over 1200-km to bring her ailing father home during the lockdown from Haryana to Darbhanga. She is currently the brand ambassador of the Bihar Govt's Social Welfare Department to fight drug abuse.
- Covid-19, notwithstanding and not to be deterred by it, an all Women Pilot crew made Aviation History in India when they flew the first ever, longest non-stop flight from San Francisco to Bengaluru over the North pole by taking the Atlantic route to reach Karnataka at the other end of the globe.
- A young fiery politician Ms Mohua Moitra of Trinamool Congress made a bold and courageous speech in parliament when she spoke on Courage and Cowardice, challenging the present Government of its cowardice in dealing with the dissenters. She was fearless of the repercussions of her speech, setting an example for many women in the country who feel suppressed and oppressed.
- While these women made name by their extraordinary deeds, there were the many teachers and other women who are our unsung heroines.

Despite the challenges thrown at by Covid, they maintained a work balance of life. They juggled between household chores, teaching, taking care of their families and their children, the kitchen and the sulking husbands among other things. They should never be forgotten. We salute all of them.

- The farm protest. For the first time we have seen women in large numbers at the Farm Protests. So much so that the CJI Mr. Bobde had to ask as to what the women were doing at the Protest. Should he be reminded that it is women who are the backbone of society and not just men.

Finally, we think of all the women who looked after those who were most in need at this time of distress. Those who cooked food, stitched PPE kits and masks, and in some cases opened their homes to those on the road. I am certain that almost all Religious Congregations have reached out in various ways during this lockdown. Closer home, our own Apostolic Carmel Congregation as a matter of policy took a decision that no parent will withdraw their ward from our schools during these difficult times. As a Congregation we also decided that we would cater not only to the education of the children but also provide for food for those families who were disadvantaged. Very early into the lockdown our Communities reached out preparing masks for free distribution. In Bangalore the sisters stitched PPE suits for the health workers of St John's Hospital. In Mumbai our sisters continue to reach out to the migrant community by providing dinner every single day for the past 12 months and the Delhi community reached out by arranging buses for the migrants to reach their homes. Largely it was women everywhere, driven by their motherly instinct who were the first to reach out in love and service, and today we need to celebrate our ability to nurture and care for those most in need.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Education:

I want to spend the next few minutes focusing my thoughts on the field that I belong to, namely education. The silent sufferer and perhaps the victim of the pandemic's collateral damage has been the education of our children. The focus of many debates has been the economy and of course health and possible vaccines. The disruption in education, however, will have severe repercussions which will only be visible in the future. A World Bank report, 'Beaten or Broken: Informality and Covid-19 in South Asia', has quantified the impact of school closures in monetary terms and India is estimated to lose Rs 32.3 lakh crore in possible future earnings. The reason we need to discuss education here is because some school leadership positions and a vast majority of our teachers are women. Similarly, more girls have been impacted than boys when it comes to education.

School leadership quality is among the biggest factors ensuring high-quality student learning worldwide. Women school leaders develop greater interactivity with children, helping them achieve larger engagement with

learning ensuring better results. Developing women school leaders is therefore key to improving school education in India and across the world. The proportion of women teachers in developing countries, including India, has risen significantly in recent years. However, their participation in school leadership is comparatively low due to ingrained negative perceptions as well as several sociocultural barriers.

### **The negative impact of Pandemic on Education**

All the school teaching went digital, confined to homes for the majority of the students. The digital world, however, was an unanticipated obstacle for many teachers who were experts in book, talk, chalk and the face-to-face classroom methods. They had to be trained to meet the challenges of the present situation and go ahead with online teaching. Many educators looked for alternative jobs to sustain their families as they lost their teaching jobs or their salaries were withheld. Some former teachers are now trying to fit into any job that they can get.

Even if they had internet access many students struggled to obtain the gadgets needed for digital learning, especially in families with more than a single child.

- Then there was discrimination made between boys and girls. The parents chose to keep the girls at home and boys were provided with facilities. Again this discrimination has been seen in the past too where boys are made to clean the boards while the girls are asked to sweep and mop the floors. The midday meal provision is a great blessing to many students in India, closure of schools during lockdown meant many children were deprived and thus malnourished.
- There were hundreds of cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse. The recent comment made by the Highest office in the country that of CJI stating that a rape accuse should marry the minor victim. Where was the noise? It only came from women only to be quietened again by the bar council.
- Discrimination is found not only in civil society but also in the Church. Church has been too slow to open for women's participation in responsible places. Thanks to Pope Francis, however, that things are beginning to change, though again very slowly.
- On the other hand we as a Nation are battling another divide based on Religion. The hate campaign against minorities is on the constant rise, often supported by those in power. We as women leaders must ensure to enlighten and dispel the darkness surrounding this area.

As time passed, and days turned into months and now a year, all of us still have doubts and questions: When will life be normal? When will the administration of vaccines to all, especially, the poor, be completed? But life continues to go on and so does education. We sense the great damage done to the field of education in this era of the coronavirus.

This data helps us to understand the extent of this damage:

- Over 1.5 million schools across India closed down due to the pandemic. A switch to large-scale digital education is not possible now.
- According to a survey by the Campaign Against Child Labour (CACL)-Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, child labour has increased by nearly 280 percent among vulnerable communities in the post Covid period in Tamil Nadu.
- Only 24 percent house-holds have access to the internet, according to a 2019 government survey.
- In rural India, the numbers are far lower, with only 4 percent households having access.
- The education ministry's budget for digital e-learning was slashed to Rs 469 crore in 2020-21—the year Covid struck—from Rs 604 crore the previous year.

While students in several other states have gradually returned to schools and colleges, their counterparts in states like Delhi are still confined to homes, spending long hours online, leading to concerns over physical and mental health triggered due to the prolonged use of electronic devices, and the lack of meaningful companionship of their peers. The education ecosystem of India, already weighed down by myriad issues such as school dropouts, learning deficiencies, teacher absenteeism, gender disparity and lack of infrastructure, now faces yet another big challenge—the widening digital divide. Even in the national capital, when government schools started online classes during the lockdown, the attendance hovered between "25 and 30 percent".

According to UNICEF, the Covid-19 pandemic has battered education systems around the world, affecting close to 90 per cent of the world's student population. In India, the closure of schools due to the pandemic, affected 286 million children from pre-primary to secondary levels. This adds to the 6 million girls and boys who were already out of school prior to Covid-19. The National Education Policy, released in a hurry during the pandemic by the government in July, has again put pressure and many states are not clear on the implementation part, educators are challenged to make a change, blended with the traditional mode.

### **Some Positive side-effects of the Pandemic on Education**

It can of course be argued that the pandemic also had a positive impact on the educational system and the challenges of moving online enabled everyone to move a step higher in the methods of instruction. The hitherto peripheral digital education in India came centre stage and is now increasingly getting integrated into the mainstream. The pandemic certainly opened new paths to innovative methods of transmission of knowledge across the globe, but it was a very challenging proposition in India as many people live in areas without internet access, while others attend more poorly equipped government-run schools. Many efforts were made to continue education at all levels with online methods, but it could not be made available to everyone.

It might have been on the internet that I read this quote attributed to Marvin Minsky: "You don't understand anything until you learn it more than one way." This quote was certainly illustrated during the pandemic, as teachers used diverse methods for teaching and learning.

COVID-19 did force the Educators to adopt digital technologies to deliver education. Educational institutions moved toward blended learning and encouraged teachers and students to become technology savvy. Soft technology, webinars, virtual class rooms, teleconferencing, digital exams and assessments became common phenomena, where otherwise we might have merely defined them - or they might have come into practical use a decade later or more.

### Our Response:

It is precisely during these times that Leadership demands that we follow the path of compassion, sensitivity and altruism.

Even if we are in the school communities, as most of our communities right now are, there are a number of areas where a special attention can be given to the needs of the girl child. Most of our schools are girls' schools and we need to see how and to what extent we are taking care of their needs as far as their uplift is concerned.

- How do we bridge the gap of divide between boys and girls sensitising the Parents on Gender bias? More importantly the boys in some of our schools where it is co-ed?
- How do we counter the hate campaign that is every day destroying the very fabric of our Nation to be secular?
- Do we for instance take note of the poor children? And take care that girls are not withdrawn from our schools?
- The Pandemic has thrown new challenges centring around our children, Mental health is a huge area and are we even geared to deal with this? How are we going to provide care and support?
- Do we notice those who are malnourished?
- Are we keen observers of the children under our care to find out as to who is having difficulties at home; whether they are coming from a broken family; or if the parents are sick or lost their jobs or are not at all there?
- Do we have special counselling sessions for those kids that might need it?
- Do we have a mechanism to find out if the child is being abused by one of the relatives or neighbours or someone else?
- Do we motivate children from richer families to also be sensitive to the needs of the less fortunate?

- How do we in leadership roles shift our focus from discipline and high grades in board exams to overall development of children and towards healthy values for co-existence in society?

The spiritual head of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, Pope Francis called on "all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life" to "not allow omens of destruction and death to accompany the advance of this world" and for ordinary people to become the protectors of humanity:

It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about. It means caring for one another in our families: husbands and wives first protect one another, and then, as parents, they care for their children, and children themselves, in time, protect their parents. It means building sincere friendships in which we protect one another in trust, respect, and goodness. In the end, everything has been entrusted to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it.

### **Conclusion:**

What then is the world beckoning us to? Is it the comfort zone of our long established institutions, confined to mere administration and a feel good factor or are we alive to all that is happening around us? How are we protecting the girls under our care? Are we ready to stand alone in our role as leaders with a prophetic voice completely bereft of titles, position, power and the rest?

Action is the key; a true leader wants to draw others to act upon the vision and see to its fruition. Once people are possessed by the passion, they are inspired to sacrifice everything for it. If leaders today could inspire such passion for service, this world would be a better place. This poses a big challenge to our leadership: what is our involvement beyond our four walls. It is true we are doing a lot and we are doing quite well to some extent but the way of Jesus Christ demands always more and is absolutely challenging. He invites us to have a heart of the gospel: see the way Christ did, feel the way He did. And though that is a tall order, He is there by our side to help us look beyond and help us walk with him.