



# ACCENTURE DIGITAL ROUNDTABLE: BE WITHOUT LIMITS

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

**Isha Bhalla** [00:00:03:05 - 00:00:29:28]

Good evening everybody and thank you so very much for joining us right here at the Accenture Digital Roundtable, supported by the Economic Times Edge. The discussion today is themed around Be Without Limits. It really is going to bring together women, trailblazers, redefining the boundaries of grit, of determination, of success as they brainstorm. Discuss a lot on a few of these issues.

Why do organizations today need to embed the culture of equality in workplace? How is it that organizations and leaders together involve women at workplace so that they can thrive and feel that they belong? The critical need of women in leadership. Starting from the boardrooms where organizations are drafting policies for women, not just this. But our discussion will also touch upon the role of technology and the role that it can play when it comes to building a level playing field.

Also discuss about role of organizations in elevating communities, among several others. We're looking forward to this very interesting session. Let me extend a very warm welcome to all our speakers we have with us. Ms. Ruhi Ranjan, Lead Europe markets, advance technology centers, India and Inclusion and Diversity lead Accenture, India. It is such a pleasure to extend a very warm welcome to Ms. Noopur Chaturvedi, Chief Executive Officer and NPCI Bharat BillPay.

May I also present to you Ms. Pushpa Bector Executive Director, DLF Retail. A very warm

welcome to Dr. Keerti Patil, Joint President and Chief Technology Officer Kotak Mahindra Bank. It is a pleasure to have with us Dr. Shilpa Vora Chief Technology Officer Marico.

May I also extend a very warm welcome to Ms. Annie Mathew, Chief Information Officer, Mother Dairy, a very warm welcome to Ms. Shobhana Lele, Chief Information Officer Bombay Dyeing and taking these discussions forward will be our moderator, Mr. Ashwani Mishra, editor ET Edge. He is truly somebody who's going to bring about the secret success mantras and the strategies of multi-tasking and trailblazing with ease from these wonderful leaders who have joined us today. May I now hand over to our moderator, Mr. Ashwani Mishra?

Ashwani Mishra [00:02:20] Thank you, Isha, for setting the context and the wonderful introduction. Once again, a warm welcome to all our panel members. It's an absolute delight to moderate this panel of women, trailblazers and trendsetters, women who have broken the barriers and have created their own path. I sincerely hope that this discussion inspires and calls on people across to work together and take a more active role in ensuring greater empowerment of women.

The freedom to work by choice and in conditions of dignity, safety and fairness is integral to human welfare, Having a guarantee that every woman has access to this freedom is an important end to itself. Building a diversified workforce and culture of equality is key for sustained growth. There is absolutely no



shortage of ink that has been spilled in the form of research, reports, articles, interviews.

Now, each of them emphasizing on the need to create a future workforce that is equal. However, despite some progress, the reality is that women continue to be under-represented at every level of workforce. Now, that's precisely some of the points that we will be discussing today. With these words I know one thing that I wanted to highlight is a report from the United Nations, and they made a bold statement out there, which I would like to quote here.

“The world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030 and has been pushed further off track by the socio economic fallout of the pandemic. Women and girls remain severely affected, struggling with lost jobs, livelihoods and derailed education”, unquote. This statement calls for a serious introspection. If we are not on track to achieve gender equality in the next eight years.

What is the immediate call of for action? What are we missing out on? But before we deep dive and seek some answers around these questions, I would like to open up this forum and get your quick views. As women leaders, you have been working towards creating an inclusive organizations. If you could share your journey, what have been some of the areas that you have been focusing on? What are some of the steps that you have taken to accelerate accelerated gender equality. It would be great to know your views.

**Pushpa Bector** [00:04:51] That's a great starting remark, I must say. Yes, You know, I represent retail, real estate, and real estate has always been, if I can use the word patriarchal and highly male dominated. So when I started, I joined DLF 17 years back. There were cases when I would be the only woman in a pack of 40 or 30 male members.

It slowly became that I'm, you know, one woman amongst two or three women came up. Even today within DLF, at my level, probably there is

one more and that's it. So, yes, we have a long way to go. However, within DLF in retail, since I head retail for the past 17 years, as I grew up within the hierarchy here, one thing that I have ensured is that the ratios are much more equitable.

We have 25% women in this in the workforce, in retail, because retail is highly aligned to both men and women doing well. There are multiple opportunities that we've given at all walks of career paths for women here. Secondly, I also like to say is that, you know, post-COVID, one of the things that we learned amongst some of the nasty things was hybrid work culture is not so bad as long as it is well monitored and structured.

So, for example, if a woman is, you know, just given birth and the first year is always very tough, we can have a different view to her working out of home twice a week and yet being able to be as effective and her promotions are not getting impacted.

So I think as women, we can do our bit to ensure that careers are not broken mid-way and equal opportunities are given. I don't believe in reservation. Quite honestly, I don't believe in that quota system. I believe that the women can do very well on their own, on their own terms. All they need is equal opportunity. So, with that, I think COVID's hybrid culture probably is one of those elements. If well used can be a good leveling ground for women.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:07:15] Absolutely. So great opening remarks here. So, you know, a couple of points that I made note of quickly was 25% of the workforce are women and you have, you know, tried to create multiple opportunities for them, ensure that the career is not broken mid-way. So that those are some very relevant points here. Anyone else, please, let's keep this free flowing, yes Ruhi.

**Ruhi Ranjan** [00:07:37] All right. So I think it's a it's a kind of a business priority for organizations now. And Accenture's unwavering commitment



to inclusion and diversity really starts at the top. The culture of equality actually is deeply embedded in the fabric of Accenture. And I think we believe that gender equality can only be a reality if leaders, you know, become role models for an inclusive workforce.

So I think it's very, very important for leaders to become role models who support, you know, inclusion and diversity across as a culture in an organization. And I think we took some very bold steps. We made a public commitment in 2017 that by 5050, we will be a gender balanced organization by 2025. Right. And I'm and we will have more women in leadership roles.

And today I can very proudly say that, you know, 47% of our workforce is women and 25% of our leadership roles are by women. And this has been our incredible journey, right? It has not happened by chance. It's been very intentional in our approach, and we've made significant interventions. It's a business metric which is actually tracked very closely, and we've ensured that we've created leadership role models, right, for women to emulate and have somebody to look up to.

And it's very important for an organization to invest in having leadership roles allocated to women, women in leadership positions, because when policies are made for women, it's the women who actually support these policies and we have to come together. So there's some very specific actions that we've initiated while we continue focusing on our diversity growth.

We've also ensured that we have market leading benefits and policies for our women employees. We continue to have programs to attract, grow and retain our women. We invest in some specific employee resource groups and networks for women, which allow coaching and mentoring. And we also ensure that, you know, there's advocacy there is mentorship, there's coaching for women to actually thrive and grow and be beyond their limits.

It's very, very important for us to create that safe

environment where women can continue to learn and grow. And we've invested in a lot of activities around ensuring that women take career as a priority during different life stages. And these have actually benefited us significantly because I really feel that leaders can have a big opportunity to unlock the potential of women.

Women need to feel that they can achieve the impossible because our social structure is so differentiated today. You know, a lot of family responsibility, caregiver responsibility lies on our women. And as organization, we have to support our women through those life stages to ensure that they realize their dreams of becoming, you know, having the career in organizations in India, Inc. as they go forward.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:10:42] Absolutely. So, again, very, very insightful when you share those numbers. And it's good that we are talking numbers here. So you know, 47% of your workforce is women. And then as you rightly said, leadership, leaders need to become role models for inclusive growth. That's very essential across. Noopur, I believe you had a point to say.

**Noopur Chaturvedi** [00:11:07] And also, I think Pushpa and Ruhi covered it very, very well. Couple of things that we are doing as well is, one there needs to be an intentional approach towards gender ratios. And while we are at around 10% right now, our stated objective is to be an equal opportunity employer. And that really starts with the hiring process itself.

Right. The development will happen at a later stage, but at the hiring stage itself, can we have the hiring managers be trained for, you know, being aware of their biases and if possible, remove those biases at the time of hiring? We as, you know, NPCI have a skill assessment test which removes, you know, that process itself because it is psychometric in nature and gives equal opportunities again to the prospective candidates who are applying to us.



So that is part one. We ensure that there's at least one woman applying for every role that we are hiring for. So that also ensures that they are able to at least meet us on whether or not the hiring proceeds forward. And, you know, I have experienced it with myself across so many organizations that the hiring questions themselves are so biased where women are concerned.

And I'm sure all of us have heard the questions around are you married? What's the age of your children? Who are the caregivers.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:12:43] Quite interesting, Noopur. So I had one and this is more out of curiosity. Do you think the hiring or the selection process has a strong male lens attached to it?

**Noopur Chaturvedi** [00:12:55] Absolutely, I can assure you assure you Ashwani, that none of my male colleagues get asked some of these questions that we as women face. And just to, you know, make the hiring managers aware and draw the boundary lines in saying that this is okay to ask and it not okay to inquire about. You know, that's small change itself, I feel, gives a lot of confidence to or the prospect of women who are interviewing with organizations like us.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:13:25] Any other views at all?

**Shilpa Vora** [00:13:27] Hi Shilpa here, part of Marico family and I completely agree too in Marico and it's exactly some of the words that were spoken earlier. It's a leadership commitment. It is extremely intentional and it's a belief that needs to be fostered by the leadership team because it is something that has to start top down and a couple of initiatives that Marico's taken for example, our inclusion and diversity vision is actually executed by the members themselves.

So they are the ones who actually create the vision and execute it. And of course, it's governed by a council and things like, you know, diversity, consciousness, how are you diversity

ready? How are you looking at roles? All of that is sort of discussed over there. A couple of other things that we are doing is we've recently launched a program called Phoenix, and honestly, it's more gender neutral.

It's not just for women, it's for anybody who is looking at a second career program. It can be tailored for an individual who wants to come back to a career and who might have taken a break for various reasons. Even our maternity leave, for example, does bring in that individual aspect of what is it that our members need and tailor it to their requirement.

And I think time and time again, what we ensure is we are pushing the boundaries on gender balance, on gender equality. In fact, on our board we have 3 women out of 11, not just I would not just say employees, but even on the board, we are ensuring that diversity is sort of brought in and diverse thoughts are brought in.

And I think as a company, we value very much what that diversity is and how I mean, at the heart of the company is innovation. And diverse thoughts are what foster innovation. So it is something in sort of almost the DNA of how companies looked at over here.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:15:18] Absolutely. Yes. Right. So companies are making meaningful and sustainable progress towards gender equality, you know, and they're going beyond the table stakes... What is lacking and what needs to be done and know how can we accelerate the whole gender equality across?

**Pushpa Bector** [00:15:40] Are you are you saying are you asking about the challenges.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:15:44] The challenges and also the steps you have taken steps towards ensuring and the.

**Pushpa Bector** [00:15:50] Challenges with it? So I think that two three things, you know. First of all, women themselves, I always believe, need clarity of where they want to go. Some



women come with that clarity. Some women are still in, you know, let me see, can I push this boundary or not? I think women should have the confidence that they can push the boundary.

It starts from within. I firmly believe that. And the second and that's a challenge, that's an internal challenge that I always constantly work with the women employees that, why do you feel you can't do it? What's in it that it makes you think that you won't get your share of voice, you know, in a boardroom or in a meeting room?

You got to have that confidence from within. Number two, I think the challenges always have to do with safety. In Delhi, NCR, kind of an environment there are a few spaces where they unfortunately cannot be so comfortable because after 10, if they have to travel, that's not a very safe thing. Even if companies, you know, pick up or drop, etc. There is that little bit of challenge which they face at a macro environment, you know, from a safety point of view.

The third challenge that I do think is from where, you know, their families and what is their environment. Now unless and until that environment is conducive, again, it comes down to the confidence that they have that goes down. If, say, I've had situations where there are brilliant female employees, they find either their husband saying, no, you know, you're spending too many hours at work, you better not.

The mother in law putting pressure. All these are ground realities and she fights with it and then somewhere gives up. So these are the challenges and these buckets that I can think of. But however, I think the whole idea is if we and in the organization spaces give that opportunity to people in which the work environment is conducive. With respect to say her personal challenges. She will choose her work environment because it gives her an understanding of how she can sort of explore herself, her personality, other than just, you know, her personality of what is expected around her personal life.

So I think once these balances are in place and we in the work environment can only help with that kind of balance, we help in DLF where you will be amazed to know that now every woman's day or every three months, there are webinars held on how a woman should financially plan herself. It's amazing how many women do not know anything about financial planning, and so we try to equip them so that, you know, they learn to walk. And if they learn to walk, then they learn to probably sprint.

**Ruhi Ranjan** [00:18:49] I completely agree with what Pushpa just mentioned. Right. So I think very important for women to have intentionality of careers. A lot of women in India, surprisingly, produces highest number of women graduates today, but they do not make it to active assignments. Right. And you can see that. It is not a lack of ambition. It is not the lack of jobs and opportunities that exist.

And I think completely in agreement with Pushpa when she says that somehow I, you know, our women feel shortchanged at different career stages. They want to move to husbands when they get married. They want to give up their jobs, when they have children. And I think as organizations, we have to take into account these life stages for our women employees. Right. And ease them in these career aspects.

So when you know, when children are born, you know, how do we help them to come back to work, to ease it into work, give them lighter roles, which allow them to be with their family and children. And the last few years have actually seen a lot of women not giving up during those life stages because they are working from home. Right?

So like we launched a program several years ago called as Returning Mothers Program, and it's been extremely successful. Because women, when they come back, are looking for opportunities, counseling, mentorship for them to ease into work. And this program has been really very successful in absorbing women



when they return from their maternity breaks. And we've been significant in its success because 99% of the women come back. We've also helped in, you know, tying up with the creches in the cities that we have our offices and for women to leave their kids. And these creches have been evaluated to Accenture standard. So they provide a very safe environment for employees to leave their children.

And I think also coming back to Pushpa's point, we've created programs which help women upskill themselves, you know, on the job, providing them with opportunities to learn new technologies because we are a technology firm at the end of it growing very rapidly. So how do women keep abreast of it? And I think the collective network of women really helps because when they see other women doing well, you know, they feel that they also can do well. So therefore, role models becomes very important in an organization.

So creating this network of women where they learn together, grow together and opt for assignments because they see their other peers do it very well. And then obviously encouraging women to opt for roles. So, you know, we give them opportunities to to scale up and opt for roles. And Pushpa just mentioned, that security for women is an extremely important thing. So how do we ensure that we can provide that ecosystem where women can be picked up for work, dropped back safely for work?

So it requires, as I said, a very strong intent because when you have the intent, then your policies start, you know, being built around how do you intend how does that intent come to reality. And it's also a significant amount of investment of the organization in terms of leadership time to be able to create that ecosystem which feels very safe and feels that we walk the talk. We don't only, you know, have policies, but we ensure that we encourage women to make use of those policies and grow in their careers. I think I think we've started on this journey and our results speak for ourselves.

But I'm very hopeful that India Inc will rise up to this challenge and we'll have far greater number of women who join active workforce in spite of all these issues that crop up. And we have a very gender balanced workforce because as a country we cannot afford to, you know, not look at women coming out of our colleges. They are educated, they bring a lot of diversity of thought and knowledge to the workplaces that they are in. And we need our women to come to work. And we just need to make sure that, you know, they are successful and continue to sustain and grow in the careers that they choose for.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:22:41] Absolutely. So what according to you, would be some of the key elements here, you know, for an organization to have that gender balanced plan, strategy. In essence.

**Ruhi Ranjan** [00:22:52] It's advocacy, right? It's saying what you believe in. It's making sure that your policies are conducive to it. If you want more women in leadership, then you have to ensure that women get to those levels of leadership. Right. And you've seen like we are an equal opportunity provider. 50% of our workforce today is women. Who's joining us from universities and colleges. But then the drop out is very sudden.

We have to ensure that we are able to sustain women during those life stages. If they opt for time off, we'll give them the time off to take care of their parental activities. If they want six month of maternity leave, we offer them those six months of maternity leave. But we ask them to hang on and come back. Right.

So we have to ensure that we are able to support them. And I am very proud of some of the women that I work with. Right. And they are they are global leaders today because they have gone through those life stages. They've created careers for themselves and they in turn, you know, become evangelists for inclusion and diversity across the organization.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:23:55] Right. Let me have views from Annie, Shobhana and Kirti as well. You know, so we have technology leaders who have been there for a long time. A good thing. I was going through one of the studies from the World Bank and there was a report which mentioned that India produces 43% of women STEM graduates. Now, this is the largest in the world. The number of women joining in the STEM related jobs is high. While this is a positive, the downside has been that women drop out of these jobs during their mid-career levels. And we did talk about it as well, which creates the overall gaps and there is a leadership deficit. Now, my question specifically to Annie, Shobhana and Keerti. You have been there for over two decades now. What has worked for you. What would be your advice? And also if you could touch upon the challenges which you have overcome and could serve as an inspiration to many.

**Annie Mathew** [00:24:57] Thank you Ashwani for that. Kirti, Shobhana I'll go first and keep it crisp. I am so happy to hear about all the initiatives which are being done across different organizations. I actually come to these forums to hear what other companies doing to be frank. In the dairy industry, women are so underrepresented, it's a shame. I think one of the issues also is the fact that we kind of fit in. While we are a private company, we fit in somewhere in the space between a completely private and a government entity. Which means that a lot of policies we emulate what is there in the government also. Which means they do not give flexible work hours kind of thing.

So that creates challenges and we find that the number of women who actually want to work for us have pretty limited. Even, I mean, I kind of had a sizable number of women in the team, but again, different life stages because we do not extend quite a few benefits to them in the way of flexi hours or something. I mean we give them one year, almost one year maternity leave. They do get. But after that also the challenge continues, right? I mean, one year, six months is paid maternity leave, six months we normally

extend kind of thing.

So they manage to take almost a year off. Even then, coming back to work full time is a challenge which all of us recognize. In fact, I am very envious of all the women today because I'm sure all of us have gone through not having those options and the struggle and the guilt associated. So if we could feel 20% less guilty or 10% less guilty about the way we have handled our children, day cares that they have put them in, or not pay attention to them when they needed attention. We have had to go through that because it was an either or choice. You could either have a career or be a full time homemaker. You did not have those hybrid options, which are luckily available much more. I hope and would like to believe that it is women like us who made the difference.

Who made it visible that women are able to contribute better. And to some extent of bring in some of those changes. But yeah, at least we need to do a whole lot more. Even simple things like flexi hours would be good to have. Whatever we do. So I recognize that having an IT Team which is a very mobile team, right? I need to keep them engaged. I need to keep them happy at a direct level.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:28:02] And that is essential Annie, because it goes a long, even that simple act goes a long way.

**Annie Mathew** [00:28:09] We have to. We have to. Because having been through those journeys myself, I can't turn a blind eye to everything and say ok, fine your fend for yourself. Not my problem. What we did not get, at least we have to be able to extend to people around us.

**Ruhi Ranjan** [00:28:27] If I could add to your, Annie. That's a great thought, right? Because you're kind of living the ethos of inclusion and diversity, right? When the leader at the top starts doing things which are very visible to the others, I think it's starting to set a culture. So your team automatically picks up those signals



to say they are going to be supportive of women, right, because the top leader is. So I think that's a great point.

**Annie Mathew** [00:28:47] That is why I they believe that more women coming into leadership roles.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:28:51] Will have an impact.

**Annie Mathew** [00:28:52] We are 3% of women, right. So I can't definitely top the numbers that you do. But even with those managing to have a woman at the leadership level, I have got a few other senior women also who are part of the organization. And between us, we try to do whatever we can to make things easier for women around this.

**Dr. Kirti Patil** [00:29:15] Great points shared by everybody. I would just like to touch upon some of the challenges that that organizations face, and I'm not going to repeat what others have spoken about. And I agree that it has to start from top. But I think one of the challenges that because women drop out after a certain point in time, you end up having more males at that level. So the middle manager level, there are more males than females.

And I think what we did is that we focused on training and building awareness at that level. Because there is a bias which exists. The bias could be conscious. The bias could be unconscious. Right.

And I give this example. I myself am a woman in a male dominated field. Been there for 30 years. Right. And you know, I started my my career from the IT infrastructure space where there were very few women. And even today there are very few women. And my phone is always by my side. I'm available 24 by 7. If there's a production issue, I'm there at any time of the day or night. And my infra head wanted to hire a tech lead. And I was the one who told him, don't hire a woman because she may not be available to take calls at night. And I said, I'm different, okay? My family is there to support me.

They know that is how I am, that I've been brought up in a particular way. She may not be able to handle it. And I actually said that. And then when we started looking at diversity inclusion, and then I said, What did I do? So the point is that there is this bias, right? So we take a lot of effort to break this bias. And I give this example to all the male managers as well. Just to bring home the point that there is a bias. So that's one challenge that we need to overcome. Now, coming about talking about my journey. I've been fortunate to have been brought up in a family. I have a brother. And no difference was ever made right between him and me. I'm an engineer. He's a doctor. So the stereotype was broken then. My father always wanted me to be a doctor and him to be an engineer. Always encouraged to speak up. Right. But. But still, I faced those challenges.

Predominantly being in the male dominated and even in engineering. Whenever I traveled, I was the only woman. So it is not going to be easy for for women who have not been brought up in such an atmosphere. To walk into a meeting where there are only men. So we have to acknowledge it. And only if we acknowledge then we will be able to overcome this.

My message to every woman is that there is bias. It does exist. It is a hard fact. Let us not push it under the carpet. Right. So if we acknowledge that, then only as women we will be able to work on it. That's the first thing I tell women. The second one is I think everybody has spoken about it, which is that women should believe in herself. And this is my message to the women. If you believe that there are glass ceilings around you. If you believe so, and if you want to break them, then you first break the glass ceilings that are there in your mind. Because if you believe that you can't do it and a woman can't do this, then you will never be able to do it. And this is what we go and tell our women folk.

Third is that, that means you basically believe in yourself, right? Third is that be yourself. Because they may see women who have.



reached whatever stage they have reached. Right. And they believe that maybe this woman was smart. Right? She got all those opportunities, right. She's the good communicator. Maybe I'm not. And therefore, I share a lot of a lot of stories. Where I went through the fear right. The first time I had to I had to speak up something in a meeting where there were only men around. And when I never got an opportunity to speak and how I keep my hand raised. Even I do that even today. Because it's not easy, right? Because ten men and there's only one woman. It's difficult, right? Because if you don't raise your voice, it may be difficult.

So be yourself. Just don't succumb to the stereotypes, because some women then believe that to reach the top, you have to be bossy, too aggressive. And that is not how we have perhaps been brought up. And perhaps I don't want to be like that because that's not my nature. So I do share those examples.

One woman walked up to me and she said, I'm an introvert. I am really an introvert. Right? And you said, go and network. I don't know, what do I talk. And it's not about networking with men. I don't even know how to network with women. So these are some of the things and I'm sure that some of the men also would be going through this. So I'll say, yeah, you you can talk about what you are comfortable with.

And we are fortunate that even men today like to talk about children. When I started my career, they were stereotypes, where they would not talk about children or children's illness or education or cooking food. I think today it is much more open. So believe in yourself. Be yourself. And you will get the respect only if you have enough knowledge. You strive to get that knowledge right. You keep learning. And today there are so many opportunities for online learning. Right?

And especially in technology, where technology keeps changing. Encourage women to learn, to learn to learn. If you are knowledgeable, you will get the confidence and nobody will then question you that you know you are a woman. So third

thing. Courage, I think courage to try new things and courage to say no. Because I think the yardsticks that are used to measure performance for women are different.

And Ruhi I appreciate what you are doing. Pushpa, Noopur all of you. Right. We are also doing our bit, but still the yardsticks are different. We just have to walk that extra mile to prove ourselves. My point is that you, to women is that you raise your hand to take up the challenging tasks. Because you have to prove yourself, but you also need to know when to say no. If you are just being taken for granted and being always given the dirty work. Sometimes you have to raise your hand and say no too. Don't be overburdened because you have to survive and sustain. That is what I would say.

But I am seeing the difference, Ashwani and everybody. I for the longest time, I was the only woman organization in the executive team. But now there are three. 30% there, which is good. And I think if this this is telecast everywhere and men see this, I think it'll be better. So I really am happy that Ashwani, you are moderating this. Because sometimes I, when I'm invited for panel discussions and we see there are only women I have actually said no. Because I don't want to be perceived as a woman who does technology. I want to be seen as a technologist who is, by the way, a woman. So it'll help if there are men in such forums and who talk about.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:36:57] Absolutely.

**Dr. Kirti Patil** [00:36:58] What women can do.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:36:59] Honestly, Kirti, I was a bit apprehensive to moderate this session, considering everyone was a woman here. But I said no, let me let me take up this challenge as well. Right. So you beautifully explained some of the key learnings that you have accumulated over the years. Believe in yourself, be yourself, have the courage and you are not keeping a closed eye. You say that biases exist. That is the fact. So a very bold statement there Kirti ma'm. Shobhana your



views, please.

**Dr. Kirti Patil** [00:37:31] Don't call me ma'm. Sorry.

**Shobhana Lele** [00:37:36] Yeah. Hi, everyone. I think it's really an amazing experience for me as well to be part of this very dignified forum. So let me start with a little bit of my journey.

So I think we spoke about the real estate, you know, where you find very little women. I think I started my career in the manufacturing industry and when we went in to the shopfloors, we would hardly find any women on the shop floor. So I remember the first time I went into the factory, it was in a remote village in Uttar Pradesh, and they were wondering what a tiny girl like me is, you know, coming in to the factory and trying to do.

But, you know, as the years passed and they saw me actually working, I think, you know, that respect came automatically and, you know, slowly and certainly I started seeing some ladies coming on the shop floor as well, which was, you know, a very welcome change that I started seeing. Even today, we do fine. But I don't think it's still, you know, the pace at which we would have expected in 15 years.

You know women to be dominating even on shopfloors. So I think the change is happening, but it is still pretty slow. So I think people like us who are now reached, you know, broken the glass ceiling and reaching, you know, this. I think we need to take this up, you know, and form our own groups to actually encourage, you know, women will have some inhibitions. You know, like we spoke about.

You know, confidence issues. I know a lot of women who have these confidence issues. And I'm sure that if we are all able to support each other, we would see much more and a better women participation. In terms of what more can be done, for example, I would maybe talk about organizations have started really seriously looking into ESG initiatives. That's really caught

on the attention of everybody. I think some where organizations need to start looking at the DEI initiatives. You know, the diversity equity and inclusion initiatives. I think just like you give importance to ESG, please give importance to the DEI initiatives as well.

Because the pace at which our country is growing, as we rightly said, without women we are not going to achieve, you know, that level of growth that India really anticipates to grow. So that is one. Hiring challenges is something that we have always faced. So I remember when we had a mid senior level positions in my own team. We desperately looked out for women who could come at that position and we really could not find. We did not have applicant applicants itself to really think about hiring of women then. And that's when I feel that, you know, a lot of support is required more at the mid and senior level where possibly ladies are you know just after marriage and kids you know, they tend to drop off from their careers.

So I think that's where the real issues exist today. And that's where I think we need to focus on. And, you know, support the women to come back into the career and give them a support system that could help them to do this kind of comeback. Yeah, let's that's my view.

**Dr. Kirti Patil** [00:40:43] Ashwani can I add one point here? As women, I think sorry I missed mentioning this before. What we need to do is that we need to bring up our children equitably. I think we women if we do that, then I think the next generation will be better off.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:40:59] Absolutely. Yes. I know. Pushpa, so the role of society again and communities is essential to empower women. While we have spoken and heard about what enterprises have been doing to accelerate women participation. What actions would be required from the society as a whole? We have seen self-help groups are there. We have we have NGOs who cater in this area. What more or are these effective?



**Pushpa Bector** [00:41:31] See, those are crisis management elements. You know, you go to those groups when there is a crisis. I think for us to really develop an element for society at large, the first thing is the mindset has to change. The mindset has to be more inclusive when it comes to male colleagues. How they talk, how they accept a woman leader. That has to change. I would say it's from the within. And here, may I dare add that when we had a female finance minister for the first time, think about the number of memes that floated for the first year of her presenting budgets. Now she's on the, I don't know, 5th year. And it took her such a long time to get acceptance from the bankers of the world, from, you know, the various. Only when she, she had to work that much harder for her to sort of.

So it's a mindset. It's a mindset issue. And that's the same mindset that you find in political parties, in corporate homes, at home, etc., etc.. And for this, Kirti mentioned just now that it is, if you have kids, boy or a girl, raise them equitably, raise them equally. That, you know, actually the journey starts from in a way, within people's homes. To a large extent, education helps, but more than education, it's cultural mindset that should because education is going up.

It's the mindset that has to change now, you know, on what women can do, especially because it should, there shouldn't be no stereotyping that, oh, can a woman do this or not do that? You know, can she even go up to the glass ceiling or break the glass ceiling? It only happens over a period of time. It cannot happen overnight. But I think in India, the journey has begun. Frankly, when I travel overseas, especially in the USA, I'm aghast to see how archaic some of those thoughts are, in certain countries. We are actually leapfrogs ahead as compared to some of the states in the United States.

And I think we are we are getting there. However, for us to really become the superpower that we want to be, it's imperative that the country harnesses all the resources it has, especially the female resource, and hence,

hopefully the mindset actually should change. That would be my closing thing.

**Ruhi Ranjan** [00:44:21] Ashwani, we really have to be very conscious of the fact that organizations really do need to play a very active role in elevating communities. Right. And when we talk communities, we are talking about women who are not educated. How do we help them? Right. Pushpa talked about self-help groups. I think very important for us to help them, those women and young girls from economically weaker sections of the society to acquire skills and entrepreneurship, to be able to be financially independent, because that brings you a lot of empowerment.

And I think corporates do their bit. A lot of corporates are now setting up programs to ensure that they are able to harness the power of the communities, right. And we've been very vocal about it. So there's a program that we launched called as Unnati, right. And it's an award winning program where we work with self-help women groups in remote areas of the country. To be able to teach them entrepreneurship. These are women who create, you know, artwork, who create, you know, some cottage industries. But they're not able to sell and reach the world. So how do we help them, you know, help whatever they're producing to be able to cater to a larger market and therefore, you know, get financial acumen on that.

We've also launched programs like Aarambh, which work with girls from economically weaker sections of the society. Bring them in for an internship for about 12 weeks and give them, you know, jobs. And we're very happy to say that we've run 24 batches of these programs and we've got about 600 young girls who are educated but never had an opportunity to work for corporates. To come and have a 96% conversion to start working in an organization like Accenture, right. And give them a career path, keep investing in them. So these are very fulfilling initiatives.

There's a client of ours called L'Oreal, right, which has actually tied up with us to launch a program in India called as Beauty for Better Life. Where we are teaching these economically weaker sections girls, right, to be beauticians. So that they have a L'Oreal certificate to take and have a active vocation. And I think, you know, we're trying to do a lot more in these areas, but it's like an ocean and we need corporates to step in a big numbers. And you talked about NGOs, right? NGOs are few and far in between and NGOs upskill people, but they do not end up giving them vocation. And I think this group of women actually can work with organizations to help these young women and young girls to get an active corporate life, right. How do we help them come back?

Annie talked about lack of women in in the manufacturing dairy sector, right. How do we encourage women to acquire those skills and have an active vocation? And I think that is true reflection of what elevating communities is all about. And I think we need to really focus on that area, because there are a large number of girls who don't make it to schools at all. Right. And we need to continue investing in them.

**Shilpa Vora** [00:47:24] Sorry, can I add a slightly different point of view here? I think we've spoken a lot about women, women role models and, you know, equality. I think I also believe we need to have male role models who stepped out of the stereotype, who have taken a career break to take care of the parents, to take care of the children, because it is important for that peer set to also see it's okay. It's an equal responsibility, male or female, wife or husband. And I think those become very powerful role models who also bring to the limelight. Because when we talk about women and gender equality, it's very important for the men to hear, you know, it's not only about women, it's about men stepping up and men taking equal responsibility.

**Noopur Chaturvedi** [00:48:08] Shilpa, just adding to your point and let me address the elephant in the room. The fact that we have so little of these male role models is because of the,

you know, the inequality that exists. And it is not an India phenomenon. It is not a global phenomenon that for the same role, for the same capabilities and for the same work, you know, women get as much as 40% less a pay. Until such time, the organizations consciously work on bridging that pay gap, there will always be a husband who looks back and says that hey I'm earning more. So let me continue working while you take a break and you move the cities with us.

So these are some of the factors that need to be considered because, like they say, you educate a woman and you actually empower and educate multiple generations. Similarly, you know, women like us who've broken the glass ceiling, it is now our responsibility to really put the voice on the table for equal pay, equal opportunity. And not just that, equal hiring and ensuring that women in our organizations who anyways looking starry eyed up to us to lead the way, we have to take them along and mentor them, groom them and ensure that, you know, they are able to take the same ladder that we were fortunate enough to take. So just just that bit I wanted to add from my side.

**Annie Mathew** [00:49:49] I was about to step in when Shilpa said that because there was some discussion about what kind of women article to create, we had suggested that why not something on the families who have supported these few women role models that we have. Because they matter more. Of what they have given up or what they have compromised because everything needed some compromise from somebody or the other within the family to ensure that the woman continued to have a career.

And those stories actually need to be articulated more. I remember there was a girl in my team and she was leaving because her husband was getting transferred. I sat down with her and I explained to her that your reason is not sufficient and I don't think that justifies. You need to have a discussion with your husband that whose job is more relevant at this point of

view, whose job can take a risk and this point of view, who can take a backseat and who cannot take a back seat at this point and then decide. The problem is women rarely believe that their jobs are important enough. They always look at themselves as the supplementary earner. And this is something which I've had a problem with.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:51:17] Why does this happen Annie? So you have raised up a very valid point. And this is true in most of the aspects. Why does it happen? So I'm asking because I do hear about these things as well.

**Annie Mathew** [00:51:31] I think, again, it's a question of self belief that women have been possibly brainwashed into thinking that their roles are secondary, nurturing homemaker kind of roles. And they cannot come up and claim that their jobs are as important as the male roles. And that mindset needs to change. Which is why when we talk about structured initiative, possibly one of the first thing which we have to do when we get girls into the workforce is give them coaching on how to think differently if we get them started on that journey, because then they start thinking of that, then they face the first challenge of either marriage or childbirth. It's too late. We have to start much earlier, possibly when they are in college or when they're starting to work, that please believe in your job in the importance and the difference of your job.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:52:32] Absolutely. Yes Kirti.

**Dr. Kirti Patil** [00:52:35] I would just like to add to the point that Shilpa made, which is a very, very valid point Shilpa, and it is going to be really tougher for men who gave up this so called traditional role of the breadwinner because the wife was wanting to embark on a career. It is going to be difficult. But what we do in our organization, we actually pick up male role models who have found or built successful women teams.

So we have one and we are predominantly I come from life insurance. It's predominantly

sales organization. It's very difficult for women to get into sales. But we have a particular branch which is led by a woman and it's an all woman branch, right. And it is doing extremely well. So in our forums we invite the divisional manager or the channel head, who actually talks about how that particular branch was turned around by an entire women team, right. So if males advocate what females do then other males may perhaps find it easier to understand. So that's what we do. But Shilpa your point is bang on. If we reach that stage then we've really arrived, is what I think.

**Shilpa Vora** [00:53:51] Completely agree, completely hear you.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:53:54] I guess we are nearing the cutoff time. You know I had one question. I know if you had to synergize and work individually or together. So let's consider this group as as a team together, to achieve a gender equality, what would that most effective way or medium be? You know, if let's have quick closing remarks here, then maybe we can wind up the conversation.

**Ruhi Ranjan** [00:54:22] I would say mentoring and coaching women. And I would I would pick that up that this group could actually help mentor and coach future generation of leaders.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:54:34] Right. Right. Anybody else?

**Annie Mathew** [00:54:35] Changing attitudes, right from childhood. I think our own children-boys, girls. We have to start teaching them about equality. Not just in our families, but across. Because by our families the problem may be addressed. That's not true everywhere. And this message needs to get permeated right from childhood, that there is no differentiation.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:55:02] Right. Right.

**Dr. Kirti Patil** [00:55:04] I think I would second what Ruhi said, but I would. Little difference

there Ruhi. I would, see, we are mentoring and coaching women who are entering the workforce. I think we should reach out to maybe educational institutions where girls are embarking on their educational journey. I think it'll be great. Because one, we can tell them what are the career options available to them.

And if the mindset changes at that time, then I think it may last a little longer. They may also choose the right kind of husband, right. Who is going to support them in their journey. No, absolutely. Because if they've chosen a husband who's not going to let them work, and then when we try to coach them, it's absolutely difficult, right. So I think I don't know how we do that. But if we're able to get together to target younger women, it would be great.

**Noopur Chaturvedi** [00:55:57] Yeah. And, you know, just adding to a couple of points there. One, you know, coaching and meeting girls who are still in education system or trying to get their first jobs, then coaching them once they actually join the workforce, supporting them when they want to join back after a break, which is a caregiver break.

And the other point that Kirti said and you know, this is something that I keep saying that the best decision you make for your career is who you choose to marry. So I am, you know, biggest propagator of that. But apart from all of this, if we are really honest about our own journey and our struggles, I think that itself gives a lot of confidence in women around us, men around us.

And we should not let go of that vulnerability that comes with being transparent and open about, you know, how did we face those situations? What would the choices in front of us and how did we get past it to reach where we are? I think just you know, that honesty in our own journey and sharing it with others actually brings a lot of motivation and aspiration back in a lot of these young girls. So that was another point I wanted to add from my side.

**Shilpa Vora** [00:57:27] I completely agree,

because I think when we've grown through our journeys, I don't think any of us worked in companies which had policies that promoted gender balance or women empowerment. So to me, I think what really works is, is having those role models. I think having some sort of lean-in circles for different life stages, because everybody has different challenges from where they come of the circumstances that they're a part of, you know.

Not everybody might have the same context even if the lifestage that they're in. So having I think somebody to just, I would say coaching and mentoring, but also sometimes very contextual coaching and mentoring I think is often needed. And it might not be a group thing, it might just need to be one on one for that person, often just be a confidant because just getting things off your chest sometimes is also important. And I think all of us, I think individually have absolutely played those roles and I think we just we can just do more, whether it's at the organization, at the community level with our own nieces. And, you know, I mean, the world is out there for us to influence.

**Ashwani Mishra** [00:58:31] Absolutely. Shobhana?

**Shobhana Lele** [00:58:33] Well, I think the first one that I would like to advocate is the financial independence. To instill the confidence in women that they can achieve the financial independence and they should achieve financial independence. That is one.

And the second is the confidence because at some point or the other, I feel there is a lack of confidence. Maybe due to the brainwashing like we mentioned earlier as well, I think that the level of confidence needs to be built up. And I think the eco-system as women, we women as an eco-system, we really need to, you know, stand up and get this confidence thing really out of the fear of the unknown for the women. I think that needs to really be killed at the base level. That's it.



**Ashwani Mishra** [00:59:19] Absolutely. Absolutely. I guess, you know, we have reached the cut off time as well. And before I hand it over to Isha, I'll just say that I truly stand inspired through this conversation with you. I hope everyone watching this will feel the same. While we are taking steps towards gender equality, there is still a lot that needs to be done. And the one thing that I would really want to make as as the closing statement here is that the world cannot advance if half of its population is held back. Over to you, Isha.

**Isha Bhalla** [00:59:55] Thank you so very much, Ashwani. I think nobody could have put this brilliant discussion together with such balanced thoughts the way you have. Thank you so very much. And a big thank you to our panelists for making sure that, you know, we drive all these thoughts together. It is really time to break the biases set forward trends.

Like you said, find the right match as well. But thank you so very much. It's been wonderful listening to all of you. You are an inspiration for so many young women out there. And we hope that you change the way people think and there is a change in mindset. So thank you so very much. It's been a pleasure having all of you join in.

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