

Dear comrades,

Hearty wishes to every one of you on International Women's Day 2018. We celebrate this day in honour of the great struggles that are waged by women, throughout the history of working class. We also mark this occasion to acknowledge and appreciate the wonderful roles that women play in making this world habitable, livable and lovable place of living. We utilize this occasion to reflect on the problems that prevent women from achieving gender parity, oppressions faced by them, and work out measures that lead to progress of women in all spheres of life.

One of the first organized struggles for women in modern times was held at Lowell Cotton Mills in Massachusetts in 1834. Women worked for 14 hrs per day in mills in confinement, noise, lint filled air, for 1/3rd wages as compared to men. When these wages were also cut, they organized and went on strike. Women in several other mills joined them and an organised movement started for the first time in history. A second strike followed in 1836. Both the strikes were crushed by management, but that is how pioneering struggles start. Defeat gives spirit for better and more organized action. Women began Labour Reform Associations and started huge petition campaigns and political action, asking the Massachusetts state legislature to cap working hours in mills at 10 hours. In 1847, New Hampshire became the 1st state to pass a 10 hour working day. This was the first success for organized working women in any part of the world. This success fuelled organized women movements throughout the world's working class. Today, we remember that struggle with a sense of pride and honour.

The first National Womens Day was held in NewYork in 1909 to commemorate the 1908 garments workers strike. On 8th March 1908, 15000 women garment workers marched through Union Square to demand economic and political rights. The three month strike against Triangle Shirtwaist and other mills became hugely successful. This success was celebrated throughout Europe and Soviet. Clara Zeitkin, a German socialist proposed designating a day as 'International Women's Day' at International Socialist Congress in Copenhagen in 1910. From 1911, we are observing International Womens Day. From 1975, UNO began celebrating International Womens Day on March 8th.

Comrades, the working conditions and safeguards that are available to women today, are a result of many such glorious struggles across the world. We have an 8 hour working day, equal pay for equal work, at least in the government sector, and statutory framework for women like Maternity Benefit Act 1961, Factories Act 1948, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Sexual Harrassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 etc. None of these acts were made by way of compassion, but were a result of prolonged struggle of the working women. The latest Act in 2013 against sexual harassment at workplace was a result of Supreme Court guidelines in the Visakha case. Everyone knows that women are subject to sexual harassment in all spheres of life, but it took till 2013, and only after a long and concerted legal struggle before the Supreme Court, that guidelines were issued and Government found it fit to pass an Act on this issue. We should keep this in mind that nothing could be achieved unless we organize and wage struggles. We should realize that, though the working women's movement has achieved significant results, there is a lot lot more to be achieved.

Nagaland, which went to polls recently, did not have a single woman MLA in its 54 years of statehood and 12 assembly elections. The situation is not much rosy in other states and even in the Parliament. Women representation in Lok Sabha is barely 11.3 % - 62 women out of 543 MPs. Take any elected body, including the trade unions, the presence of women in leadership positions is barely minimum.

There are two reasons, resistance to give opportunities to women as men are entrenched in leadership positions, and lack of enough strength from women to push themselves ahead. Let us address the second issue, which is the only way to repulse the first issue.

Women are bogged down by multiple commitments, they have the inescapable responsibility of household duties. A working woman needs to get up early, cook food, pack lunches for everyone, layout breakfast and clothes for the boys, then commute to work, spend the day in office, and commute back to home, to cook again, help in homework, and then retire to bed, trying to look beautiful. This is the story of every working woman, either in Postal department, or in Dept of Atomic Energy, either as a clerk or in a higher cadre. There is no CL or EL to this duty. Good health or bad health, there is no escape from this routine. Added to this, women face stigma, violence and harassment at workplace, in society, on the streets, during commute, and some times, even at home. Women face deficit in respect in all walks of life. Media and commerce address women as a commodity. They stereotype women, erect standards of medieval morality and even resort to body-shaming. The invisible chains that tie up women are too heavy and too arresting, to unshackle. It's a herculean task for any woman to unshackle herself, free herself and make her voice count, in public discourse and organized struggles. But we have to realize, and there is no better day than today, that struggle is the only way. It is only because of our organized struggles that we have achieved so far.

One way to derive inspiration and strength to unshackle ourselves is to celebrate the success stories of women, big or small, in all walks of life. Look around for icons and celebrate them. When our daughters submit a project in school and get two stars, let's celebrate that at home, with all the vigour. When Harmanpreet Kaur hits 171 in 115 balls in Cricket World Cup, let's put her posters (over Sachin's posters) in our rooms and celebrate that with joy. When we come to know that global Chairman/MD/CEOs of General Motors, Pepsico, IBM, Lockheed Martin are all women, let's celebrate that. When we realize that the superstar of male-centric Bollywood during 1980s was not a man but a woman, let's celebrate that. Every woman who achieved something in life, would have achieved against all odds, facing many difficulties. Let's be proud of all of them, let's gain inspiration from them. And let's help our colleagues, our relatives, our neighbours, our fellow women, in whatever they are aspiring to achieve. And stand by her in all her difficulties. Unless a woman supports a woman, no one supports her.

Another way to unshackle ourselves is to resist media stereotypes. Media is obsessed with stereotyping women as loud viragoes. Social media is obsessed with posting comments on women in the form of jokes, which insult and denigrate the attitude of women. And the commercial industry insults women by portraying women as beautiful only if they are slim or if they have certain body statistics. Why is a man's figure or his tummy not an object of shame but a woman's figure or tummy is shamed. A woman becomes a mother, has a rebirth herself when she gives birth to children, undergoes many body changes and fights to come back to normal. Whatever shape she eventually has, the society should make her feel proud of it, not ashamed of it. But because of the intense media standards on what is beautiful and what is not, women are psychologically forced to follow some fad diets, starve themselves and spoil their health. Even school going girls are doing dieting. This is a very dangerous trend. Yes, we need to have fitness. We should do exercise or yoga if it fits in our daily routine, or at least some walking, but beauty doesn't mean looking like a pencil. We need a movement, first in our minds, and then in the society, to stop this trend. Because of our workload at home and at workplace, women need to eat well, be healthy, and feel confident about whatever

shape they are in. One report says that 80 % of present day women above 40 are cases for bone related ailments like osteoporosis. So I request all women to take your health seriously, get some sunlight for Vit D, have iron and calcium supplements and above all, eat well. Don't starve. We are ourselves. We will not allow the media to judge us.

Friends, the sure way to unshackle ourselves is to develop the confidence in our abilities. Seek responsibilities, take active part in leadership positions in your workplace, in administration, and in unions. If you develop the will and confidence, there is nothing that a woman cannot do, as good as, if not better than, her male counterpart. We have an immense task cut out before us. Once women gain employment, they should be endowed with right to equality, right against discrimination in workplace. Women should be assured dignity of labour, equal wages, beneficial facilities and additional safeguards which compensate for their lack of level playing field. These safeguards and benefits should be made statutory, institutionalised, and implemented thoroughly. We should make relentless fight for safeguards that we are yet to achieve. We should be very vigilant. Because there will always be attempts to mock, sneer, and trample on the safeguards and the genuine benefits that we rightfully deserve.

"Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world." These are the words of our present UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. In recognition of this 'unfinished business' and 'greatest human rights challenge', the campaign theme for International Women's Day for 2018 is selected as 'Press for Progress'. The campaign requires that the following activities are taken up :

- a. Maintain a gender parity mindset (question any lack of women's participation, identify alternatives that are more inclusive, nominate women for opportunities, always include and support women, think 50/50 as goal),
- b. Challenge stereotypes and bias (question assumptions about women, challenge statements that limit women, always use inclusive language, work to remove barriers to women's progress, buy from retailers who position women in positive ways),
- c. Forge positive visibility of women (identify ways to make women more visible, extend opportunities to women first, assume women want opportunities until declined, select women as spokespersons and leaders, support visible women),
- d. Influence others' beliefs/actions (supportively call-out inappropriate behavior, campaign for equality in meaningful ways, lead by example via inclusive actions, be a role model for equality, actively contribute to change the status quo) and
- e. Celebrate women's achievements (believe achievement comes in many forms, value women's individual and collective success, ensure credit is given for women's contributions, celebrate women role models and their journeys, support awards showcasing women's success).

Lets do that comrades. As Chairperson of the Womens Committee of Confederation of Central Government Employees and Workers, I call upon everyone to join hands and rededicate ourselves to this call – Press for Progress. We will make it happen.

Usha Bonepalli.
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