



Closing the Gender Digital Divide

Envisioning & Embracing 'Gender Equity'

Cover Photo: School-dropout Adolescent Girls and Young Women studying at 'Good Shepherd Computer Literacy & Spoken English Course', Amaravathi (India)
- Project supported by MISSIO, Austria

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2023

International Women's Day - an occasion for the humanity to celebrate women's achievements, contributions, and to reflect on the issues and problems faced by the girls and women all over the world and work on tangible solutions, for the greater interests of girl children and women living in especially difficult circumstances.

Women, Adolescent Girls and Men jointly celebrated the International Women's Day in Amaravathi at the premises of Good Shepherd Convent on 8th March 2023 with the theme of 'DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality'.

Organized by

**Sisters of the Good Shepherd,
Amaravathi (India)**

GOOD SHEPHERD CONVENT, AMARAVATHI (INDIA)

Closing the Gender Digital Divide

Introduction: Around the world, discrimination has been inflicted onto women down the ages. While taking cues from pre-historical times, it is observed that women from great civilizations were only known to have given the freedom to practice medicine. Men alone seem to have taken position in most of the development opportunities, including in the field of science and technology. Now, the world has undergone a historical moment of change; women are increasingly started to realize the discrimination imposed on them and are taking initiatives to break the barriers their rights and are striving to make use of every opportunity and have penetrated in all development spheres. However, when dependent on male, they are still seeing the denial of opportunities to enter into certain fields. Now, there is a tectonic shift in the way working women are seen in society; women are progressively taking interests on information technology. However, here also, there seems to be discrimination shown for girl children and women.

Focus of Mission: Sisters of the Good Shepherd, following the spirituality of their Foundress St. Mary Euphrasia, are joining hands with like-minded lay people whom they fondly call as their ‘Partners-in-Mission’ and are carrying out their mission around the world with special focus on women and children. In India, over the last 170 years, they have been continuing to expand the same with full vigour. In Andhra Pradesh State of India, Sisters have their mission over the last 55 years. Over the last two decades, apart from direct missionary activities, they have been taking advocacy and campaign activities on ensuring safe space for the people at the margins, with special focus on women and children.

The Theme of IWD 2023: As part of their mission, this year 2023, on 8th March which is the International Women’s Day, Sisters and their Partners-in-Mission, as they used to do in the past, have created a platform for the women, adolescent girls, and men to come together to become persons with consciousness on women’s rights and take necessary action in their day-to-day life. As the state of women is steadily progressing, the United Nations (UN) have chosen the theme for International Women's Day 2023 as 'DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality'. The Sisters and their Partners-in-Mission in their planning meeting reflected on the theme and accordingly prepared a list of persons whom they could invite to address the women, adolescent girls, and men. The theme denotes the essence of the topic and the need to close the ‘digital gender gap’; it strives to indicate that the ‘gender digital divide’ is the modern form of discrimination women and girl children are facing.

Celebrating the International Women’s Day 2023: On 8th March 2023, as many as 238 women, 43 adolescent girls, and 33 men from 14 villages around Amaravathi gathered at the Good Shepherd Convent (Amaravathi) to listen to get oriented in order to reflect and take against the different forms of discrimination on women being enforced in various forms. It was also a time for recalling the achievements and contribution of several people and appreciating for such efforts. The daylong celebration was marked by speeches by the Government Officials working among and for women and children, human rights activists, academicians, and issue of certificates to

Adolescent Girls who have successfully completed their 'Computer Literacy and Spoken English Course at 'Good Shepherd Computer Literacy and Spoken English Course'.

Welcome Song

Trainees studying at 'Good Shepherd Computer Literacy and Spoken English Training Centre' sang a welcome song at the beginning of the programme. It is a Telugu song '*Sinnari Sirimalle Chelli Nee Pelli*' which narrates sad story of 10-year-old girl who was given in marriage and the sufferings that she faces after that. That was to educate the women and men the chain of suffering child marriage brings in the lives of women, such as threat for mortality, change of begetting child with disability and so on and so forth.



Adolescent Girls and Young Women sing a 'Welcome Song' to Invite the Special Invitees and the Women and Men Participants for the Celebration of the International Women's Day 2023

The welcome is enough to list out the unending chain of sufferings a woman undergoes due to child marriage. It was like a clarion call for the participants to understand what it means by 'Child Marriage'. Despite several campaigns, the practice of Child Marriage continues to persist in the society, hence, the song is very relevant even today; the song also has given a vibration for the mind to linger around the thoughts related to violence in different forms being imposed on girls and women. It was like a prelude for the entire day; thanks to the organisers for choosing the song and for the singers who gave the mood for the rest of the day.

THEMATIC SPEECHES

Inviting persons with feminist ideology, Government Officials, formal and informal leaders and human rights activists and requesting them to speak to the target people has been one of the strategies being adopted by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd for educating and training people on different aspects in life. This year too, for the International Women's Day 2023 several people were invited to address the women and men gathered on 8th March 2023. The Chief Guest of the International Women's Day 2023 celebration at Good Shepherd Convent (Amaravathi) was Mr. K. Ratna Kumar, Secretary of Guntur District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Andhra Pradesh.



Mr. K. Ratna Kumar, Secretary of Guntur District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) expressed his happiness over women taking leadership roles but unhappy with the increasing crimes against women and girl children.

Embrace Gender Equality: On seeing hundreds of women attending the International Women's Day at the premises of Good Shepherd Convent (Amaravathi), Mr. K. Ratna Kumar expressed his happiness over the enthusiasm shown by women. He said that it is true that even in this world of technology, women are again discriminated; girl children are not sent for higher education and even in some of families, girl children are denied of accessibility to mobile phones with the fear that they might be spoiled and misled. The theme is relevant as we see the discrimination being practiced at different levels due to poor understanding of values of women in our society. This is an ideology of particular sections of people who think that women and Dalits are lesser people and therefore must be kept as slaves for ever. Such an ideology, he said, must be discarded and it should be replaced by the ideology of 'embracing gender equity', for without women there would not be a future.

In each District, the Government of Andhra Pradesh has appointed a Child Protection Officer (DCPO) who functions as the head of the DCPU (District Child Protection Unit) and shall be responsible for carrying out all day-to-day functions such as coordinating and supervising implementation of the ICPS (Integrated Child Protection Schemes) and all other child protection activities at the district level, including monitoring and supervision of all institutions/agencies/projects/programs/NGOs.



Despite educational opportunities, a significant percentage of the girl children are not able to continue their formal education, says Mr. Vijay Kumar, District Child Protection Officer (DCPO) of Palnadu District.

Formal Education to Girls is a Means to an End: Government of Andhra Pradesh is increasingly taking innumerable steps to ensure formal education to girl children. However, a significant percentage of the girl children do not even complete their formal education. Mr. Vijay Kumar, District Child Protection Officer (DCPO) of Palnadu District says that an estimated 40 percent of girls aged 15-18 are not attending school. Participation of girls has increased at all levels of education. However, statistics reveal that though there is high enrolment of girls they exceed even in the drop out lists. The enrolment ratios in the state have increased over a period of time and are above 100% at primary level. However, the retention rates are low and out of every 100 children in Class I only 69 reach Class V, and 48 reach class VII, and only 38 reach class X. These figures suggest the enormous problem of wastage despite considerable increase in enrolment. Despite increase in literacy levels among all the population groups in the Andhra Pradesh state, 50% of the female population is still illiterate. Government of Andhra Pradesh is taking steps to ensure retention of the girl children in the schools through various attractive schemes. It is the responsibility of the parents to ensure formal education, says Mr. Vijay Kumar.

Sisters of the Good Shepherd around the world, in the selected pockets, are taking efforts to bring in reformation in the lives of the marginalised communities, with a special focus on girl children and women. In Amaravathi, right now, the Sisters are focusing on supporting children's education from the poorest of the poor communities; reach out to children in need of care and protection through CHILDLINE programme; train women on their income-earning capacities through an Economic Justice Project; educate the village communities on the Constitutional Values and Legal Rights; and equip the school dropouts on Computer Application and Spoken English Skills, and the school going adolescent girl children with Life Skills recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Sr. Deanna Pereira who is the Project Coordinator of Adolescent Girls Project spoke to the women, adolescent girls and men on the International Women's Day 2023.



Women are the Masterpieces in the God's Creation, says Sr. Deanna Pereira, Project Coordinator of Adolescent Girls at God Shepherd Convent (Amaravathi).

Women are the Masterpieces of God's Creation: Women need to understand that they are less to none; developing self-image and self-esteem of women are very important; women must learn to develop positive view of themselves, says Sr. Deanna. Wishing all women, a happy International Women's Day, Sr. Deanna said that among the God's creation, women are the masterpieces which are carefully crafted to find solution to all negative feelings. Women need to be brave and learn to face all challenges and have the right to be happy at all times. Women must be respected for their contribution to humanity and to the nature, says Sr. Deanna.

In Amaravathi town, Sisters of St. Augustine run a school by name ‘St. Augustine English Medium School’ for children of both sex but with special focus on girl children. Being the neighbours, Sisters often invite them to participate in the events related to community organisation and development. This year, Sr. Jhancy who is the Vice Provincial of Augustine Sisters and Principal of St. Augustine English Medium School, Amaravathi was invited to participate in the International Women’s Day to share her thoughts in relation to women’s development.



A mother is the female parent of a child and as mother she plays an important and greater role in the family says Sr. Jhancy, Vice Provincial of Augustine Sisters and Principal of St. Auagustine English Medium School. Amaravathi.

Women’s Pivotal Role in the Development of the Family: Since times immemorial, women have supported their families as mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, and grandmothers. Throughout their lives, their roles changed and responsibilities increased overtime. But they never stepped down. Despite all odds, they stand by their families and even became the strength, hope, and the driving force of families. Despite all their contribution, their endeavours remain unaccounted and unappreciated. It is high time that we create equal families by sharing their load. It is quite heartening to get to know about the concepts of shared household work, shared parenting and flexible workplaces are slowly gaining importance. If we truly dream of a gender-equal world, we should start with gender-equal families, says Sr. Jansy.

Due to the accompaniment of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd with Dalit women, thousands of women's minds have been transformed over a period of 2 decades and more. Dalit women increasingly have changed their mindset and turned a new page in their lives. Of late, during the village-level Panchayat election, Mrs. Sudharani who was a member of Women Shelf Help Group (SHG) initiated by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd was elected as the Panchayat President of Lingapuram panchayat. She was one among the special guests invited for the International Women's Day 2023.



Mrs. Sudharani who was a member of Women Self Help Group initiated in Lingapuram village by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd has now been elected as the Panchayat President. She expresses her gratitude to Sisters for teaching her the relevance of taking leadership role.

Women must Utilise Development Opportunities: Leadership activity is a complex combination of genetic and environmental factors. Although some people can be born with an innate potential for developing leadership skills, according to the research, leadership qualities are essentially the result of training and practice. According to Mrs. Sudharani who is now elected as the Panchayat President of Lingapuram admits that she was trained and moulded by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Amaravathi. It is because the ongoing continuous training programme imparted to the women in SHGs, she has learnt the leadership values. She recalled the very many trainings she had undergone at the premises of Good Shepherd Convent in Amaravathi. If an opportunity presents itself for you to get something you want and if you do not take it, you might not get the opportunity again. She had expressed her gratitude to the Sisters for their commitment in empowering the girl children and women and asked the women to regularly attend the training programmes and participate in the campaign activities and get motivated for shaping a bright future for all.

Sisters of the Good Shepherd are present in Amaravathi for the last 29 years. They are striving their level best to change the social situation better for the people, especially for the marginalised sections. Through community interventions, they strive to improve the socio-economic conditions of women and children. Sr. Vinnarasi who is now the Community Leader of Good Shepherd Convent (Amaravathi) shared her thoughts for the day with the women on the International Women's Day.



Women must develop positive thinking and attitude in order to achieve and shine in life, says Sr. Vinnarasi, Community Leader & Director of Human Rights Project in Amaravathi region.

Women are Precious: Women are entitled to a supreme place in their own sphere of activities as men are in theirs. Women possess infinite capacity for self-maintenance and self-regeneration. She is an embodiment of creation. Women need to internalise their ability and should not meddle with their negative thoughts; they should boldly come out and prove their mettle, says Sr. Vinnarasi.

Sisters are currently working with the people at the margins to improve their income-earning capacities. Since 2016, Sisters are running 'Computer Literacy and Spoken English Training Centres' for school dropout adolescent girls and young women both in Amaravathi and in Krosuru towns. Parents, especially women must send their adolescent girls and the young women aspiring to learn the computer literacy skills can join immediately since such training courses benefit the individuals as well as their families. On the basis of the computer application knowledge and excellence attained by the Adolescent Girls and Young Women, Sisters are providing Computer Training Course Certificates which will help to secure jobs immediately, said, Sr. Vinnarasi.

In the present touch screen society, the Government of Andhra Pradesh is striving to meet the needs of the people through technology. Different Departments of Government is developing different internet applications that would serve the people to have easy access to services. In this digital world, while we reflect on the negative impacts, it is time also to see the positive aspect of the same. The Police Department has developed a GPS-based internet application which is very handy for the women to receive police help. Mr. Nagendra Rao, Sub-Inspector of Police, Amaravathi who was invited to address the women shared some useful information.



'DISHA App' in Andhra Pradesh state is a step towards the safety of women in emergency situation. Women must boldly make use of this App for the safety and protection of women, says Mr. Nagendra Rao. Sub Inspector of Police. Amaravathi.

'DISHA App' for Women in Distress: 'DISHA App' is an GPS-equipped internet application developed by the technical services division of the Andhra Pradesh police, which sends an alert to the DISHA Police Control Room (established in the Police Control Room) when a woman or girl in distress just shakes the mobile phone which contains the DISHA App. The App also provides another way of calling for help; they can also press a button on the phone, but in emergency situations if that is not possible, the victim can send an alert to the police by simply shaking phone five times. The personnel at DISHA Police Control Room in turn will alert the police available near the spot. Police will rush to the spot using GPS-equipped vehicles and assist the person in

trouble or anticipating trouble. This has been well explained to the women on the International Women's Day by Mr. Nagendra Rao, Sub-Inspector of Police, Amaravathi.

Investing in girls' education transforms families, communities, countries and the entire world. Girls who receive an education are less likely to marry young and more likely to lead healthy, productive lives. They earn higher incomes, participate in the decisions that most affect them, and build better future for themselves and their families. Girls' education strengthens economies, prevents violence on them, and reduces inequality. It is also about girls feeling safe in classrooms and supported in the subjects and careers they choose to pursue – including those in which they are often under-represented. Mrs. Simhachalam, Child Development Project Officer of Guntur District emphasized her point of views in this direction during her discourse with the participants on the International Women's Day 2023.



Higher education for girl children brings in possibilities for economic independence and it is also the best instrument for prevention of violence on women, says, Mrs. Simhachalam, Child Development Project Officer of Guntur District.

Education to Girls Gives Economic Freedom: Gender discrimination is one of the many barriers to education around the world. That is a situation we need to change. Education to girls reinforces gender equality, and can reduce some of the causes of gender-based violence. Education also helps students develop skills like critical thinking, decision-making, and responsibility. In social realities, it is witnessed that the educated women tend to be more informed about nutrition and healthcare, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and their children are usually healthier,

should they choose to become mothers, says Mrs. Simhachalam, Child Development Project Officer of Guntur District.

While children all over the world face different forms of hardships in this modern era, girls in particular are subjected to discrimination and coercion for the sole reason of being a girl. Statistics show that girls are more impoverished than boys, receiving lesser health-care facilities and lesser exposure to literacy and development. For a girl, in some cases, discrimination starts as early as she is conceived. An ultrasound & a surgical process is all it takes to stop her from entering this world, all done in the hope of an heir, a boy child. Mrs. Indira, Retired Child Development Project Officer of Guntur District who has been one of the close associates of Sisters of the Good Shepherd says that this situation must change.



Women are discriminated from conception to death. This Needs to be internalized by all girls/women. Girls/Women must internalize the discrimination inflicted on them in the name of religion and caste system and take action to be free from abuse of all kinds, says Mrs. Indira, Retired Child Development Project Officer of Guntur District

Women Need to Internalise the Discrimination: Gender discrimination is a situation where people are treated differently due to their gender. The gender stereotypes of a society define what is appropriate and what is inappropriate behaviour for its members. These stereotypes affect both boys and girls, and they are unable to reach their true potential. Indian society has grown in such a way that girls are more disadvantaged than the boys since the beginning of their lives. Women are discriminated from conception to death. This needs to be internalized by all women.

Girls/Women must internalize the discrimination inflicted on them and take action to be free from abuse of all kinds, says Mrs. Indira, Retired Child Development Project Officer of Guntur District.

DISTRIBUTION OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING COURSE CETIFICATES

Computer is an inevitable technology in the modern world because of the popularity of the Internet, World Wide Web and the e-mail. Even in small tiffin centres, computers are used for billing and accounting purposes. Computer is a much-needed tool for every business, banking, government, entertainment, daily life, industry, education, and administration. A person with computer skills has more opportunity for employment than one without such skills. Similarly, English has become an inevitable language which is on the lips of every person. Moreover, a person operating computer needs to have acquainted himself/herself with minimum spoken English. Having studied the need for such skills, and the readiness of the school dropout adolescent girls to learn such skills helped the Sisters to establish a 'Good Shepherd Computer Literacy & Spoken English Training Centre'.



Adolescent Girls who have successfully completed their Computer Literacy & Spoken English Course at Good Shepherd Convent, Amaravath, receive their certificates.

Certificate Distribution Ceremony: Twelfth (12) batch of Adolescent Girls who have successfully completed the Computer Literacy & Spoken English Training Course, that is supported by MISSIO, Austria, were awarded with certificates. Along with computer literacy and spoken English, the adolescent girls and young women were provided with Life Skills recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO) were during Saturdays. Those who have received their course certificates expressed their gratitude to the Good Shepherd Sisters, and their

Partners-in-Mission for their commitment and contribution. They also expressed their gratitude to MISSIO, Austria for its continuing support for the last 7 years. From the past records, it was studied that nearly 85 percent of the adolescent girls and young women on completion of the course were able to get placements. This is indeed good news for the girls and the Sisters and the Partners-in-Mission.



Ms. Kulakaluri Sowjanya, on successful competing of Computer Literacy and Spoken English Course receives Computer Course Certificate from Sr. Jhancy, Vice Provincial of Augustine Sisters and Principal of St. Augustine English Medium School, Amaravathi.

Digital literacy to everyone must be made accessible and affordable, including women and girls so that they are able to operate digital devices (like computers, smart phones etc.) and work on it for various purposes including for educational, commercial and digital transaction purposes. Thus, we shall be addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, that state under Goal 4: “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.



Mrs. Shaik Muntaj, one of the beneficiaries of Good Shepherd Computer & Spoken English Training Centre expressed her gratitude to Sisters for proving training which enables her to supplement her family income and free from financial crunch.

Vote of Thanks

On distribution of the Computer Training and Spoken English Course certificates to the adolescent girls and young women, Mrs. Mariamma, Community Mobiliser of Adolescent Girls Project, proposed vote of thanks and the International Women's Day celebration came to an end with fraternal lunch with the participants; it was very family-like; it was a moment of joy and happiness for the participants to munch over the very many messages being told to the participants that were lingering in their heart and mind on this International Women's Day 2023.

Reflection

Based on the deliberations of the invitees, the Document Expert would like to list some of the long-term as well as few immediate and possible action that could be taken up for changing the situation better for the girls and women, with reference to creating a safe and supportive space for the Girls and Women in the digital world:

- 1. Enabling Affordability and Accessibility:** Most of the computers are imported and hence, the costs of the computers are quite high and the day-wage-earning parents naturally find difficulties in purchasing computers for their children. Most of the villages do not have internet facilities at all. Hence, the suggestion is that as A policy, the State and Central Government of India should think of producing environment-friendly computers and electronic gadgets within the country and make them available at the affordable prices, even to the people at the margins.
- 2. Monitoring the Online Activities of Children:** Children make use of their online experience, with its potential for learning, exploring, being creative and connecting with others. However, parents must be mindful of practical internet safety precautions; parents must protect their children from potentially harmful or inappropriate content and activities. Parents must take interests in checking their children's phones to know which sites they are using, or games they are playing. It is because, there are games which will addict them and mislead them to harmful practices.
- 3. Mobile Phones are Angels and Devils:** If properly used, the mobile phones will work as guardian and guiding angels and if used wrongly, the devil will play its role. Awareness about this must be provided all, especially to girl children.
- 4. Be Safe with Web:** The Internet is without a doubt one of the best resources available to us. Unfortunately, it is also extremely dangerous if you are not aware of who and what lurks behind the scenes. Everyone should know how to be safe when surfing the web, but internet safety tips and tricks are spread out all over the web without a go to resource.
- 5. Beware of Using Social Media:** Posting pictures on social media has become such a common thing to do that we do not always take into account the consequences of making some of these images public. This is especially true for pics that give a glimpse into our personal life. Clearly, it is not merely about selfies or pics that people post, but also about those done by third parties without your authorization, and that can damage your reputation when they go viral online; only when you are keeping things limited and time bounded. When one failed to do so, then, mobile phones become devil. The children should be aware of avoiding chatting or becoming friends to strangers.

6. Embrace Gender Equity in Digital Use: In India, it is observed that a significant percentage of the population do not have internet access, except the use of mobile phones. Among the children in the age group of 6 to 18 years, hardly 10 percent of them have access to internet facilities, and among these 10 percent, lesser than 3 percent are girl children. One of the main reasons for such a fall in the percentage is due to unaffordability of the parents to get their children computer and internet facilities.

A gender-responsive approach to innovation, technology and digital education can increase the awareness of women and girls regarding their rights and civic engagement. Advancements in digital technology offer immense opportunities to address development and humanitarian challenges, and to achieve the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals.

7. Grassroots-Approach to Close Gender Digital Gap: Grassroots Organisations working for the empowerment of the people of lower socio-economic strata can think of focusing on providing vocational training to Adolescent Girls and Young women on the computer literacy and they must side-by-side educate the younger generation on the judicious use of internet and communication facilities.

Conclusion

Discrimination against women is one of the worst forms of human rights violations. Discrimination to women seems to be an unending story. This year, the theme of the International Women's Day puts the spotlight on digital gender equality. In this digital world too, it is again, it is noted worldwide that women are comparatively being denied of internet accessibility; the women again are the victims. In other words, it is visibly seen that digital technology which is the product of an industry that is predominantly by male, represents a new source of discrimination and bias. It is not possible to achieve gender equality without addressing the digital divide. A multi-pronged integrated approach has to be created and made functional in order to close the digital gender divide. At the family level, the parents need to respond to the digital needs of their girl and boy children equally; at the school-level, efforts must be made to ensure that girl children are equally treated with reference to accessibility of computers and other digital connectivity facilities; and at the state-level, Government should come up with digital-related policies that embrace gender equity.

Needless to say, that closing the gender digital gap can accelerate economic independence of women, national and international growth, and support the implementation of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development. However, the efforts towards narrowing the digital gender gap must go beyond addressing immediate practical needs at the level of the learners – it should be embedded within flexible and permeable gender-responsive education systems which will further work for a just and gender-sensitive society that would create a world better place for all.

Documented by

Mr. Dilip & Mr. A. John Aruldass, Partners-in-Mission
Good Shepherd Convent, Amaravathi (India)

