

Important Voices

Op-Ed by High Commissioner Ruchira Kamboj in The Cape Times of 2 March 2018

As the women of Tarini touch Cape Town on the fourth and penultimate leg of their historic circumnavigation, they underscore a critical point: nothing is impossible for women if they are given the chance to fly.

However, for far too long, women have been held back for a multitude of reasons. Often times through the narrative handed down by generations, by those who would perhaps draw a sense of security from stereotyping, and even by women themselves who continue to lack conviction in their own capabilities.

Voices have been silenced and thoughts have been lost as centuries of cliches and stereotypes have impaired societies and cultures. However, it is clear that we have entered a time where such a mindset no longer holds validity. And given the unquestionable power women wield, there is no doubt that women must be at the forefront of change.

Change which ends stereotypes that teach women to be fearful and timid, or men to be gutsy and strong. Change to influence society to construct a level playing field for every human, of *any* background. Change which uplifts minority groups, and celebrates diversity amongst women. And change to have confidence in our ability to make our own decisions for ourselves.

This is the symbolism behind the 'feat' of the women of Tarini, who undertook a challenge in a perceived 'department of men.' These are women in a sport that has hitherto been the domain of the privileged and the elitist. However, they have practiced and exemplify courage and bravery that is not necessarily always assumed to be an attribute of women.

Back in India, home of the *Tarini* crew, we have in many ways been trailblazers, with women occupying key positions across the widest spectrum of politics, government, business, sports, the arts, etc. All of which has been backstopped by a pro-active government policy that seeks to empower women, beginning at the grassroots and in the school benches.

The '*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*' or '*Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child*' is one pivotal example of a government scheme which seeks to leave no stone unturned in the quest to make women self reliant and strong.

There cannot be true progress unless the 50% of humanity is given their chance to thrive in our world of constant acceleration and boundless growth. For the initiation of

powerful movement and fearless action, everyone must be welcome to the table. And for compassionate change, everyone must be understood.

After all, some of the most influentially bold and brilliantly creative deeds have been undertaken by women throughout history. From Joan of Arc in 1412 France, fighting for freedom, to Emily Dickinson for moving hearts and minds with words of elegance and depth, to Marie Curie, winning two Nobel prizes in chemistry for her work with radioactivity, to the brilliant Native American guide and interpreter, Sacagawea. It is evident that excellence in any field is part of being woman.

Women have made some of the most influential rulers, from Queen Victoria of England to Queen Anne of Spain, women have stood their ground, from Rosa Parks to Gail Laughlin and women have been beautiful, with depth and grace to move all audiences, from Jane Austen to Josephine Baker. And of course, the list of exceptional women is far from over here. However, this *petit* preview aims to emphasize the immeasurable power of what it means to be woman.

Even today, in 2018, women stand at the forefront of change as we listen to Malala Yousafzai's story of breathtaking strength, as we watch Hillary Rodham Clinton conduct herself with unparalleled character, or as we witness Oprah Winfrey voice her compassion to change lives.

Or even as we savour the glorious moment of watching the Tarini women from India touch Cape Town shores. Once again emphasising that gender will never define potential.
