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Of Pathfinders and Pathbreakers: Women's Day Special

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Women continue to sustain the quest to make a mark in the workplace and balance their personal life. Pandemic or not, woman power has not diminished one bit, and it shows in their exemplary achievements in India and the rest of the world. On the occasion of Womenâ??s Day and for the completion of its 20 years in March 2022, BioSpectrum salutes 20 inspiring leaders of the life sciences industry, for motivating others around them, breaking the glass ceiling and paving their own paths in 2021. These 20 women are powerhouses in their respective fields, inspiring not just their employees and the people around them, but other women and the next generation of women leaders.



In spite of the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, women's representation improved across all levels of the corporate pipeline in 2020 and 2021. This is an encouraging sign and worth celebrating after an incredibly difficult time across the globe. As a result, the theme for International Women's Day, March 8, 2022, revolves around - 'Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow', recognising the contribution of women and girls around the world to build a more sustainable future for all.

According to the 'Women in the Workplace 2021' report by McKinsey, women are rising to the moment as stronger leaders and taking on the extra work that comes with stress and exhaustion. Compared with men at the same level, women are doing more to support their teams and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

For instance, women are doing more than men in similar positions in supporting the people on their teams. Also, compared with men in similar positions, women managers are taking more consistent actions to promote employee well-being including checking in on their team members, helping them manage their workloads, and providing support for team members who are dealing with burnout or navigating work–life challenges.

Over the past 18 months, companies have embraced flexibility. More than three-quarters of senior HR leaders say that allowing employees to work flexible hours is one of the most effective things they've done to improve employee well-being. However, many companies are missing a crucial piece i.e. without clear boundaries, flexible work can quickly turn into "always on" work and that is affecting a lot of women lately. Maybe even leading them to leave their jobs, since they have less time in-hand for the family.

As per the State of Working India 2021 report by the Azim Premji University, the number of women who have had to quit the workforce has been alarmingly high over the last one year, irrespective of their nature of employment. Almost 50 per cent of the women exited compared to only 11 per cent of men. The number of women exiting from any work arrangement is at least twice their share in that arrangement in the pre-pandemic period.

On the brighter side, more women have entered the workforce as 'freshers' than men. Also, women are taking up different kinds of jobs as compared to men. A study of the men and women who remained employed in 2021 reveals that women seem to stick around in the same job more. In other words, women have displayed higher determination in the last one year.

Raising a toast to 'Women Leaders in Life Sciences'

The Indian life sciences sector has a deep pool of talented women who have made a mark for themselves by doing exceedingly well in their careers and by setting up great examples. To start with we have Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Executive Chairperson at Biocon. A first-generation entrepreneur and global business leader with over four decades of experience in biotechnology, Kiran is fueled by her passion. She started her biotech journey in 1978 from her garage in India and today, that journey is changing lives for the better across the globe. She is regarded as an unconventional thinker with many firsts to her credit. Under her aegis, Biocon delivers on the promise of making medicines accessible and affordable to millions of patients worldwide.

Following suite is the recent Padma Bhushan awardee Suchitra Ella who is the Joint Managing Director of the vaccine company Bharat Biotech, which she co-founded with her husband Dr Krishna Ella in 1996. With experience in customer operations, finance, marketing and business development, Suchitra is a strong pillar of support and guidance at Bharat Biotech, overseeing a wide range of operations in the company.

Another prominent name is Dr Soumya Swaminathan, currently serving as the Chief Scientist at the World Health Organisation. A paediatrician and a globally recognised researcher on tuberculosis and HIV, Dr Soumya has 30 years of experience in clinical care and research and has worked throughout her career to translate research into impactful programmes. She was Secretary to the Government of India for Health Research and Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research from 2015 to 2017.

Likewise, we have Dr Renu Swarup, former Secretary, Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India. Through biotechnology translational research and industry-academia partnerships, she has supported more than 1000 startups and entrepreneurs and nearly 500 small companies for innovative research and product development. Dr Renu served in the DBT for nearly 29 years. She was the Senior Advisor and Scientist- H at DBT before taking over as Secretary in 2018.

The list would be incomplete without mentioning Dr Chandrima Shaha, a biologist and professor at the National Institute of Immunology (NII) in New Delhi, who became the first woman to head the prestigious Indian National Science Academy (INSA) in 2019. She has previously served the INSA as vice-president and director of the NII.

Every year, many women are joining the leadership list and carving a niche for themselves in this male-dominated industry. On this note, BioSpectrum brings to you 20 inspiring leaders of the life sciences industry, for motivating others around them, breaking the glass ceiling and paving their own paths in 2021. These 20 women are powerhouses in their respective fields, inspiring not just their employees and the people around them, but other women and the next generation of women leaders.

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