

If you want anything said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman.

Margaret Thatcher

the columnist

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# Empowered doubts



Queuing up for the future?

**T**ell us, what do we do?" I was speaking at a forum for working women. Most of them work in government departments. This particular state, unlike most states, had a day off on account of Women's Day. This appeared ironic in a location that is often in the news, thanks to media exposes about the sale of daughters. Because of poverty or greed or even the shedding of responsibility before the girls grow up and become an added liability for reasons of dowry. So much for the status of women in our society!

## Questions

As I spoke with them I raised some very direct questions. I could because I am a woman myself. I began by asking, "When we have so many more women in secretariats today (the full hall was a clear indicator) why has corruption in government offices not declined?"

"Can seniors officials and leaders get away with corrupt acts without the active, passive or negligent action of the secretariats?"

They all said, "No".

"So then, why has the rise of women not brought about a difference in the way of working?" I asked. "Should it not have been different from the past?" And was it not expected to be different?

All said, "Yes."

"Why has it not substantially changed then?" I probed again. They were quiet, wondering, I think, what was coming next?

## Women and governance

"Has the quality of governance changed due to the rise in the number of women in government offices now? Or is it the same?" I prodded again. Voices from the audience said, "The same."

"What are we celebrating then? And what should we celebrate? Should we celebrate the fact that we are women or should we celebrate the unique and special contribution we are making or have the potential to make to our workplaces because we are women? They now started to reflect.

And this is exactly what I wanted to see happen. I asked them again, "When a file comes to you, do you see the person behind the file or do you merely glance at the noting and the rule? Do you apply the rule mechanically or do you do it sensitively? We all have a choice after all!"

"How sensitive are you to others' suffering or needs?" I wanted them to ask themselves.

While this bit of questioning went on, it was time the audience asked me some questions. And guess what the first question from a working woman in the secretariat was?

## The compulsions

"Madam, what do we do if we are not given the right to our own earnings? What do we do if we also have to support our own parents? How do we get the right to our own money?"

I was not a wee bit bit surprised! For I had heard this from many police women too. And

Social considerations are stronger than an education and a monthly salary. Many women working as govt officers are well aware of the fact.

I remember I used to guide them on what they must ensure from the day one of their marriages.

They ought not to volunteer or commit their salaries to anyone. They must, however, contribute towards household expenses or other essentials as they deem are necessary, while keeping control over their money. I used to tell them that if they wanted, they could even have joint accounts but that they must also maintain their own personal accounts. They should also take their salaries as cheques and avoid carrying cash home. They could even ask the office to send their pay cheques straight to their bank accounts. This would enable them to exercise control on withdrawals. And of course if "you are arm twisted, you must have the courage to say, 'No'".

## The duty

As if this was not enough, another question was, "Madam what is the duty of a woman?" "Very good question and very simple to answer," I said. "You tell me what is the duty of a man?" I asked in return. She replied, "To earn for the family and look after it."

I said, "It is exactly the same for a woman today! And are you all not doing this?" I thought of leaving this much for the day with them. Even if they take what has been conveyed, it would be worth a Women's Day celebrations.

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