It is impossible to travel faster than the speed of light, and certainly not desirable, as one's hat keeps blowing off...

Woody Allen

thecolumnist

KIRAN BEDI

The powerpuff girls

The Indian woman of today is very different from the woman of yesterday. She questions and rejects dominance and thinks of marriage as a choice, not a compulsion.

Last week, I was asked to talk about the woman of today and the challenges before her. This is what I said.

The Indian woman of today is emerging differently from the woman of yesterday. I was growing up and preparing to join the ranks of the government. Most of my friends, too, were getting ready, by themselves or at the say-so of their parents, for marriage, as and when they might be told to. Their schooling and college was done early as preparation for them to be married into well off families.

Marriage, for my friends, meant a lifetime of security. It was a "good" marriage, both of who would provide them any financial with safe, well provided and hopefully happy homes with a number of children, preferably sons. The parents match made and saved and prepared for their daughters' marriages. Dowry was on display I saw many such exhibited; gold, silver, saris and expensive gifts for every possible relative. This disturbed me and made me defiant to all that I saw.

A new India

While all this still exists in many different dimensions and in all sections of society, a lot has changed for the better and thankfully. I see parents of girls keen to see their daughters become independent. They now prepare their daughters to beat the dowry menace and the insecurities of marriage. Teachers are educating girl students to stand up for themselves. Making them conscious of their potential. Graduate and post graduate courses are now becoming need-based vocational degrees. Educational institutions are even packaging special programmes for women to make them feel stronger. The media is playing a major part in raising awareness. It has placed women's issues strongly on its agenda. The courts, the law makers and law enforcers have been put under a searchlight when it comes to women's issues. Never were there so many women NGOs with so many resources and the capability to deliver.

Women everywhere

Creative writing has become richer. Look at the women's magazines, women authors, dedicated pages to women's issues in the national dailies. It's all changed for the better. Women journalists in print and visual media dominate and even crowd the scene.

Women themselves have changed and find it difficult to accept the status quo. Walk into to schools and colleges clearly reveals this. Today's girl has become aware of her capabilities and strengths. She is asking why not she? Why can't she be what she wants to be? Or achieve what her role models have. Today's woman is an aware woman. She is no longer prepared to be told what to do. She knows what she wants.

They are inspired and moving on to achieve. They are identifying their roles and chasing them. The opportunities are like never before. There is no profession beyond them. They have seen it for themselves. And they are doing it all on their own merit and not on marriage. They are also proving to be the new face of this country.

This woman is no longer looking at marriage for security alone but also for friendship and companionship, with space to grow. She is questioning and rejecting the dominance of the man or her family as was the case earlier.

The flip side

No wonder two things are happening. One, increased breakups. There is certainly reduced tolerance for indignity or assault on the woman's self esteem. Second, marriage for this sort of woman is no longer mandatory. This means late or no marriage at all is becoming an option. Motherhood too is becoming more planned with a small family being the norm.

This is the new Indian woman. The onus now is equally on this class of women, especially the privileged, to craft and energise a new India which imbibes the best of the past and of the present and helps India become a superpower of 'humanity' full of values... One which provides alongside enough for all and certainly for the less privileged.