

THE REAL DEAL

LET'S TALK ABOUT

#MeToo

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Parmesh Shahani

Head - Diversity & Inclusion,
Godrej Industries

Parmesh thinks #MeToo is an important inflection point for organisations, like Godrej, to reflect and enable a more inclusive world.



Nisaba Godrej

Chairperson &
Managing Director,
Godrej Consumer Products

Nisa firmly believes that the more businesses encourage diverse voices to flourish, the more they will innovate and grow.



Balram Singh Yadav

Managing Director,
Godrej Agrovet

Balram and his team are working hard to build women's leadership in the Indian agribusiness space.

The Real Deal is our in-house talk show that encourages open conversations on important topics.

Parmesh

Hi everyone. My name is Parmesh, and welcome to The Real Deal.

This is a show that gives you the opportunity to ask all kinds of questions that you've always wanted the answers for. Maybe things you've heard in the corridor, or on the office grapevine. Hopefully through this show we can bring you some of the answers to the questions you've always had. Now as you know, in the last few weeks there's been a lot of really disturbing stories about sexual harassment and as women across India have started speaking out about the MeToo movement, they've been speaking up and speaking out about all the different forms of abuse that they've faced.

At Godrej, we've always had zero tolerance for any form of discrimination overall. We have a very clearly stated non-discrimination policy, and we don't tolerate any form of discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, colour, caste, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, whatever category, we just don't discriminate. Through this show we want to re-emphasize all that we stand for. And also talk to our senior leaders Balram and Nisa, about why showing respect and building a diverse Godrej is so important for us, especially in the context of the MeToo movement. Nisa and Balram, thank you for joining us. I want to start by asking you very personally, what MeToo means for each of you as a business leader, as a team member, as parents, as human beings. How are you feeling in the context of everything that you've been listening to over the past few weeks?

Balram

Parmesh, you're right that the news is ugly, but I'm very glad that at least it is coming out, otherwise people in power in certain places in the society thought that they will do everything and get away with it. So I'm very glad this is happening. And I'm very sure that this movement is not likely to stop here. Maybe several of the people who have suffered will seek legal recourse, and some punishments will be given. As a father of a daughter, I can see that my daughter is very happy about it. And, she has been always reacting to this MeToo news very differently. For example, I cannot see any Kevin Spacey movie if she's around, because she just cuts it off because she says he has been a predator. That is the word she has used. I am extremely happy, and I hope this movement continues, and it continues beyond the metros, because I strongly feel that the kind of business I'm in, the power play is more severe in

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Balram

our hinterland where religion and caste are also elements of expression of power. And I hope women come out and say what they should have said earlier. Today we have a very, very powerful tool, the social media and the Internet. It will be used judiciously, I'm sure, by redefining rules of engagement and behaviour with people.

Parmesh

Thank you. Nisa, personally?

Nisa

Personally, I'm happy to see that it's come to India. We saw it come out in the US, and in the western world. We know that in India, it's a very paternalistic sort of culture. Much more in rural India, than it's in urban India. But at least now our educated, privileged women are saying that this is very prevalent. This is a big problem. And I really hope that this collective rage, because this is collective, this is us all standing together, will stop it. And it's not going to go away immediately but it's started the conversation. It's telling these men that don't know how to behave like "please behave". And on the areas are grey, because there are areas of grey here it's saying let's have a conversation. So there's some very clear... Obviously there's some legal, there's rape, there's molestation, that's one set. The other set - harassment - corporates like us have very strong policies. But there's a whole third piece that's come out, what men call sort of "wooing" or "romance", and women are saying actually, "No, it's not". And I think in India, probably over everywhere else, we're desperate to have that conversation. So I'm really hopeful that this is not just an urban movement, but this goes across the country. I hope this turns up in our women vote in our elections next year. So I really hope we bring our full force in coming together and saying enough is enough.

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Nisa

Parmesh

Thank you. We can't control the nation and the world, but we certainly can try and shift Godrej in the direction that we want it to go. And in that context, Nisa, you once wrote an email that said: "There's no place for prejudice in Godrej, only space for open minds and hearts." So I ask you specifically, why is inclusion of difference so important to us at Godrej, and what are we really doing to make it possible?

Nisa

Firstly, if you just think about why Godrej exists, and why we started. We started in India's freedom movement. We started to say that this is not fair, that India's raw materials go to the British and come back, and our economy suffers. And we said we are part of Gandhi's Swadeshi movement. Most of our profits when we started went back to this idea that there would be an independent, free India. And I think that value, that we stand for more than just making profits is something that's very core to us. And obviously for every generation, what those things that we need to stand up for might be different. Whether it's the LGBTQ movement, or a women's movement. So I think it's basic for what we are, it's the right thing to do. I think the second part, you know, sometimes, I get tired of even repeating, but research after research shows that inclusive organisations, especially old ones like ours, will let us be more innovative. It will let more diverse voices come to the table. We will do better as a business. So I think, it's both... I don't think there is any other option. It's in our values, it is who we are, and it is damn good for business also.

Parmesh

No brainer.

Nisa

Yeah.

Parmesh

Balram, you've been trying very hard to bring some of these diverse voices in your business. You've been trying very hard to build women's leadership, and in sectors which are quite new to this at GAVL. But we also hear stories about some kind of pushback where men particularly tell women that they don't have any role to play in sales or manufacturing. How do you break these stereotypes, and how are you really trying to push and creating GAVL as a more diverse and inclusive space?

Balram

So I'm here for the last 29 years, and it's my thirtieth year in this group and organisation. And I'm saying that... I can definitely say that inclusiveness has been one of the hallmarks we've had. We haven't discriminated, ever. The only issue is that our organisation is very rural focused. And you

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Nisa

know that a lot of things have changed in the country in the last decade and a half, and we are just following that trend. We always wanted to make this organisation more inclusive. We are trying very hard to do that. And we have been reasonably successful. If you see some of our numbers, that in 2015, we had 2.4% of our workforce which were women. Now it's 6.4%, and likely to be 10% in two years time. A lot of steps have been taken by the leadership team. We are strongly committed. We are introducing women in non-traditional areas, what we thought it was stereotypical, I can acknowledge. Like sales and production. But lot of effort has gone in. One of the things I also need to point out is that is we cannot have inclusiveness without an enabling environment and enabling infrastructure. For example, one small thing I want to tell you is that we have 50 plants, and 3-4 years ago, when we did an audit, only about 20% of them had infrastructure required for women employees. I'm saying that those kind of upgradations have happened. Having said that, I must tell you the challenge still remains internal as well as external. The reason is that 90% of our workforce works in Indian hinterland. It is in small cities. Most of our people come from B and C class cities with their stereotypes and thinking. Plus, we cater to farmers who are even lower in the chain of this evolution. So we have push backs, but according to me, the answer to that is perseverance. The answer to that is continuous education, the answer to that is also not getting cowed down by these changes, but come back stronger in amendments, etc., so that we can give opportunity to all sexes. And I think we are pretty much there. Managerial cadre, particularly we have done well because women in authority are less, I would say, vulnerable to these kind of pressures. And if you see, from about 2% or 3% some years ago, we are about 12% women in our managerial cadre. So we are on our way. I think a lot of things are changing in our company, its people and outside world also. I'm very sure we'll get to a 10% number in two years.

Nisa

You know, one thing that...

Parmesh

And then, hopefully more.

Nisa

Yeah, and one thing that's been really interesting for me to see, especially as we've done these global acquisitions, and seen different working cultures abroad. So if we look at countries like Indonesia or Nigeria, which are much more forward in terms of just the number of women participating in the

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Balram

economy, how they think of themselves, it is different than in India. In India, the percentage of women participating in the formal economy has actually been falling in the sort of last decade. And then I read our in-tune comments. So I actually read past the numbers in to the verbal comments, and you know, "Sales is not for women", and this is not for women and you know. And I understand that, you know, we can't just say that if you have that bias, we are going to fire you. We have to address that bias. We have to create a safe space for conversation to happen to say you, "Hey, you know, in India, in rural India, there are a bunch of Asha workers who are doing really difficult work. Can we learn how they deal with it?" Or organisations that have been successful. Or in Nigeria, most of our factory workers are women. What is restricting us? Maybe the ecosystem is different, but there are solutions. I always think about it. I look at other business houses in India. People who come from the most privileged backgrounds in education. And when there's a son and a daughter, why is it only said that the son can express their potential? I'm sure it's not a genetic thing that these sons are better. So if my father, my mother hadn't said that you are equal, go out and express yourself, and do whatever you want, then, where... So, we have to create that ecosystem, we have to understand that it's not simple. We do have cases. We had a case about a farmer behaving badly with someone in sales. A women sales employee of ours. And obviously, our first reaction is why would we even put women in that situation? And obviously, keeping people safe is also very important. But we have to create that ecosystem where you give people the choice of pursuing their dreams, and if you do that, I've seen it in other countries, we don't face this...

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Nisa

Parmesh

There are some countries in which we have more female participants?

Nisa

Much, much, more and it's very senior leadership levels also. So there is cultural context to some of this.

Parmesh

I like that both of you are focusing on numbers as well as an enabling ecosystem. I think that's very important. Despite our best efforts, we'll increase the numbers, we'll create the ecosystem, but still incidents will happen. So I want to talk about what happens at Godrej when someone faces harassment? What can they specifically do? I know a lot of people talk about the POSH guidelines – that's Prevention Of Sexual Harassment – but, very few people know where these guidelines are located, and how you, you know, what is this policy, how can you act on it, because at that moment, you know, they are really vulnerable. So guys, can you address some of this? As in, what happens if

you know, you are facing harassment?

Nisa

You know so our POSH guidelines are on Godrejite. We'll probably just pull them out along with this video on Workplace and put them up there again. So I think there's definitely POSH guidelines, but there's also, you know, people you work with closely, your superior, I mean. If you're making a complaint about them, you're not going to go to them. There is HR you can reach out to. And frankly, in Godrej, if there is an issue you can send an email directly to me. I see every complaint that actually comes in to the organisation, whether it's formal or informal. So I think the important thing here is not to be scared and feel free if there's an issue to come up. And it's not always sexual harassment, we have cases of harassment where people are getting bullied or threatened that if they don't do something, they'll lose their job. And for us, it's just not acceptable.

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I see every complaint that actually comes in to the organisation, whether it's formal or informal. So I think the important thing here is not to be scared and feel free if there's an issue to come up. And it's not always sexual harassment, we have cases of harassment where people are getting bullied or threatened that if they don't do something, they'll lose their job. And for us, it's just not acceptable.

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Nisa

Parmesh

A lot of harassment is about power...

Balram

In addition to what Nisa has said. In Agrovvet, what we did was that the HR team reached out proactively to almost 90% of the women we have in our workforce only to ask them and understand their work environment, and if anything like that is there. Because there'll be people sitting in some remote place who will be very shy or scared to report anything. So I'm saying, we thought it was our responsibility to reach out to them and give that confidence to them. Having said that, I think there are many ways to bring this change of course. There has been huge amount of training and sensitization that has gone in Godrej Agrovvet, but it has not been without deterrents also. And whenever there are cases like that, there is zero tolerance and quick redressal, I would say, in these cases. And that has gone down well with the organisation also because I strongly feel that there will be... The bad apples will be in minority. The only thing is that 90%, or the bulk, keeps quiet, watching what will happen to them. And once we demonstrate that we are very, very serious about it, the change will be much faster.

Nisa

So if you ask me, is there bias at Godrej, I would say probably yes. You know, the other day we were looking at performance in promotion data between men and women. And there was absolutely no difference between men and women in terms of their performance. So the number of women as a

percentage who get 4 and 5 ratings, or the men who get 4 and 5 ratings, and there was none in promotion at all, in all levels.

Balram

And not in salary also, if you see.

Nisa

Not in salary. But you look at 360, and there is a 10 percentile delta. So, now we have to go in to the details of where that's coming from and how. But that is saying that on average, women in a very large sample size, are getting rated sort of below men. And you know, is there a question on such a large sample? Is there some sort of bias that's happening there? So I think, one is actually. At the same time you know, both GAVL and GCPL have the most women board directors out of any listed company in India. So, but I think our onus is not to... You know, this, the idea of diversity and inclusion is to actually use the power of it, which is not PR power, we are doing this so well, but to say what are we not doing... Because at the end of the day, what is the power of this is that people really come here, and it's not about a policy, or six-months maternity leave and stuff, but they really feel that this is a place that they can flourish, we are sort of inclusive, and I think that's something that never stops. And you have to sort of, keep chasing. So if there's bias, how do we train? There's one part in the MeToo movement and that's when it goes out of hand. But we should really be at the basic level, before even that out of hand piece, we should be like super strong.

Parmesh

Yeah, which is what I hope this conversation will kickstart. I want to specifically ask you, you said zero tolerance, and that's excellent. A lot of what we've seen and what's happening with MeToo is at workplaces. A lot of very senior leaders, senior politicians, or CEOs of companies, or people in really high positions, using that position, or coercing or forcing or assaulting their employees below and you know, to engage against their consent. So my point is, how do we protect against this, you know, harassment at a very senior level? At so many companies, we see there are policies but they are for employees at the middle or lower end. But senior leaders seem to get away? Can you all just elaborate on what is it. Do we treat our senior GLF leaders like everyone else, or do we have a bias in how we treat senior leaders in Godrej?

Nisa

I would actually say that the bar is higher for them.



A lot of what we've seen and what's happening with MeToo is at workplaces. A lot of very senior leaders, senior politicians, or CEOs of companies, or people in really high positions, using that position, or coercing or forcing or assaulting their employees below and you know, to engage against their consent. So my point is, how do we protect against this harassment at a very senior level?



Parmesh

Especially on a values piece, the bar has to be higher. And we've actually seen that as we sort of, refreshed and re-iterated our values, that people are actually asking much harder questions of people's values. Not anywhere as close to sort of harassment and stuff, but just basic respect, like be on time to a meeting and stuff. So I think the bar is higher. That's why they are at the GLF. They are not at GLF because they walk around with a crown on their heads. They are GLF because they have to not only deliver results, but also uphold the company's values. So I would say that the bar is super high. We've not had any one obviously, implicated at Godrej as of now. But if anyone has a complaint, and want to write to me, they want to have a discussion, I'm sort of always available, Sumit's available, you know Balram and other members of the GLF are available. But no one, and absolutely no one is excused if any of this comes up.

Balram

My 30 years, rules have been same for everybody. So I'm saying, take for example, financial discipline, or any other kind of harassment. I've seen whether it's a sales representative or a vice president, there has been no change of rules. So rules have been same. So I'm sure that this will continue. I think this is part of our DNA. And I don't think that this question you have asked, whether the rules will be different for other people, will ever be asked of this organisation, definitely.

Parmesh

I'm glad. Can we extend that outwards to people we work with, like vendors, suppliers? We don't just work with our own employees...

Nisa

Definitely, most definitely.

Parmesh

You know we're part of an ecosystem, and so many companies set the same....

Nisa

We've had a vendor come up under the MeToo thing, and we've asked for an independent investigation. So absolutely, they would, they would... I don't think there's any point of shooting a video like this and talking about our values, unless your money is where your mouth is, which is holding people accountable for this sort of stuff. And that's the problem. It's the people in power, it's the people who have risen to the top, who are using this power. And it takes equally powerful, whether it's a rage of collective women, and social media, and men... But I'm saying the collective men and women in organisations like ours to say, "Dude, this is not happening on my watch." You know, so I think it's both those things that are very important. Like he said, hopefully a lot of this will go to legal redress. But for, you know, companies in a way, at least on the sexual harassment policy, are the legal redress on these cases.

Balram

For people who work very closely with us, and I'm talking about all Godrej companies, there is certain amount of due diligence that we do. On environmental, on solvency, on safety standards, etc.

depending on where we hire them. But I'm sure that now, we will be more vigilant on these issues also. And we will go probably deeper. Because definitely, these vendors who work closely with us, will also reflect us in some way when we get in to trouble. So I think we will be more vigilant, and we should create processes for this later also.

Parmesh

Thank you, and this is global best practice. And a company like IBM for example, which is so LGBT friendly, only works with suppliers who gives the same benefits for their employees. I think it's a useful inflection point to consider how we can include some of these practices in what we do as well.

Nisa

Or even vendors, which are smaller vendors or which are women owned, or LGBT owned or have these policies. So that's what I was meaning. Like, powerful men or women companies can use themselves as a force for good also.

Parmesh

And if anyone who is watching this wants to suggest in the comments box below any ideas for vendors like this or anything that we can do...

Nisa

Or anything that we can, you know, if there's someone, because there will be people who are watching this video and saying, "But this is not my experience". "I'm not experiencing these values or something's happening to me," or, "I want to question this", then do it in the comments section, because we will support you, or write to one of us. Because that's the most, that's the most important thing. That we're constantly having these conversations. Because then if we do that, then we don't have to have movements every five or ten years. Because in Godrej, we should be constantly having these conversations.

Balram

In addition to this, people who are watching this video, in case they want to make suggestions on better screening or monitoring of vendors or instituting some process where something like this will be detected, we'll be more than glad to look at that.

Parmesh

Or even on things like unconscious bias, or anything actually.

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For people who work very closely with us, and I'm talking about all Godrej companies, there is certain amount of due diligence that we do. On environmental, on solvency, on safety standards, etc. depending on where we hire them. But I'm sure that now, we will be more vigilant on these issues also. And we will go probably deeper.

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Balram

Nisa

So I wanted to address one more thing, which you haven't asked about, especially in this MeToo that comes up – what about the “poor men” – who've been accused. And can't someone at Godrej just accuse someone because of they... Not that, you know, it's fake, but they're trying to get them out of the organisation? And I think the answer to that is, one is to put due process aside, but in most of these cases, and research shows 95%, the woman's telling the truth. And think about it. In a country like India, or a company like Godrej, who wants to say that someone has done this? Look at the, look at the backlash. Like we were discussing, Donald Trump is there, Mr Brett (Kavanaugh) is now on the Supreme Court, and we're not talking about these women any more. You know, I actually think the moment has come for us to... Men have always sort of, the rules have been around them. So I think we need to stop saying “poor men”. That being said, you know, it's not that, if something like this comes in Godrej... You know, if someone complains, we call someone in and say you're fired, or whatever. There is due process, there is sort of investigation. And sometimes, things are grey.

Balram

When you said, ladies coming out and speaking... I think in a country like India, their coming out and speaking is a big, big thing. So it should be taken seriously. That's what I think because you know the backlash, you know the social ostracizations that can follow because in most of the cases, there might not be a legal closure. So you must always remember...

Nisa

That they have nothing to gain from this. You're saying 15 minutes of fame, but...

Balram

I'm saying that their coming out is also very important.

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In most of these cases, and research shows 95%, the woman's telling the truth. And think about it. In a country like India, or a company like Godrej, who wants to say that someone has done this?

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Nisa

Parmesh

Well I think for us, and the reason that I'm part of this, is that I really believe that our Godrej can be a really strong space for change to happen. I think the MeToo movement in India and these conversations are actually a very important inflection point for us to really reflect on and help enable and create the kind of Godrej that we want to live in and also serve as a role model say for other organisations. So consider this as just the first part of an ongoing conversation. As both Nisa and Balram have said, if you're watching and you want to contribute, you can comment in the boxes, you can mail all of us. Let's keep these conversations going. Thank you so much to both of you for being part of The Real Deal, and thank all of you for watching.

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Parmesh