

12th Edition

SAAJHI SAMAJH

Women on the Rise: Challenges, Opportunities and Pathways

EVENT REPORT

Thursday, 9 May 2024



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Chief Guest: **Ms. Shikha Sharma**, *Former Managing Director & CEO of Axis Bank; Independent Director, Mahindra & Mahindra*

Panelists:

Dr. Meena Gopal – *Professor, TISS (On Lien Pondicherry University)*

Ms. Anusha Bharadwaj – *Executive Director, VOICE 4 Girls; Founder-Director, SoCh for Social Change; Ashoka Fellow, 2023; and Echidna Global Scholar, 2023*

Ms. Gayatri Das Sharma – *Co-Founder, Timshel Consulting; Visting Faculty at the Indian School of Business*

Ms. Urvashi Prasad – *Director in the Office of the Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog*

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Introduction:

Tech Mahindra Foundation's twelfth edition of Saajhi Samajh (Shared Understanding) on *"Women on the Rise: Challenges, Opportunities and Pathways"* was organised on 9 May 2024 and it shed light on critical areas essential for fostering equitable and inclusive societies, with a specific emphasis on women's economic empowerment. Empowering women in the economy aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5, as gender equality intersects with ten additional goals, highlighting the interconnection between women's empowerment and progress.

Recognising the significance of economic empowerment for women, the panel discussion during the conference delved into multifaceted aspects and innovative approaches to enhance women's employability. In the past, the Foundation has hosted eleven Saajhi Samajh conferences focusing on themes like Teacher Development, Social Emotional Learning, Including Disability in Workspaces, Importance of Eye Health, and First Aid in Children, and has brought together an array of experts and specialists. Saajhi Samajh is the Foundation's attempt towards creating a broader platform to enable advocacy through discourse and discussion on issues related and relevant to the development sector in India.

Executive Summary:

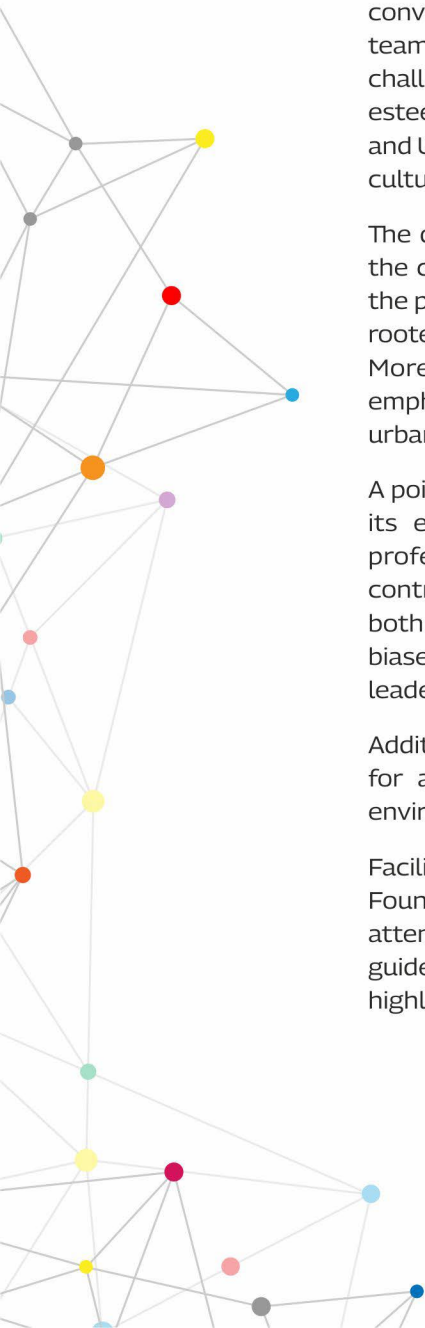
The twelfth Saajhi Samajh on *"Women on the Rise: Challenges, Opportunities and Pathways"* convened an array of influential women from diverse professional backgrounds, alongside TMF team members and beneficiaries, to engage in an enriching dialogue on the multifaceted challenges and opportunities surrounding women's empowerment. Throughout the event, esteemed speakers—Shikha Sharma, Anusha Bharadwaj, Gayatri Das Sharma, Dr. Meena Gopal, and Urvashi Prasad—shared profound insights into the intricate network of social, economic, and cultural factors influencing women's work.

The discussions encapsulated a spectrum of themes crucial to understanding and addressing the complexities of women's empowerment in contemporary society. Participants delved into the prevalent impact of social stigma on women's decision-making abilities, exploring how deep-rooted attitudes and norms shape individual agency within familial and societal contexts. Moreover, the conversations unravelled the disparities in women's financial inclusion, emphasising the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas.

A poignant aspect of the discourse centered on the historical trajectory of women's labour and its evolving dynamics over time. The panelists articulated the challenges of balancing professional pursuits with domestic responsibilities, emphasising the often-overlooked contributions of women with unpaid labour and the need for policy frameworks that encompass both public and private spheres of work. Furthermore, discussions highlighted the persistent biases ingrained in hiring practices, which perpetuate stereotypes and limit women's access to leadership roles.

Additionally, the event emphasised the critical role of men in championing gender equality, urging for a paradigm shift in mindset and behaviours to create more inclusive and supportive environments.

Facilitated by Chetan Kapoor, CEO, Tech Mahindra Foundation, and Sajid Ali, COO, Tech Mahindra Foundation, the conference fostered an atmosphere of mutual learning among panelists and attendees alike. Chhavi Bharadwaj, Manager, Learning and Development unit at TMF skilfully guided discussions, amplifying the voices of staff and beneficiaries whose first-hand testimonies highlighted the resilience and indomitable spirit of women facing adversity.



Panel Discussions

The Chief Guest and Panelists:



Ms. Shikha Sharma

Independent Director, Mahindra & Mahindra; Former MD & CEO, Axis Bank

In a conversation with Chetan Kapoor, Shikha Sharma elucidated a few key challenges for women in workplaces.

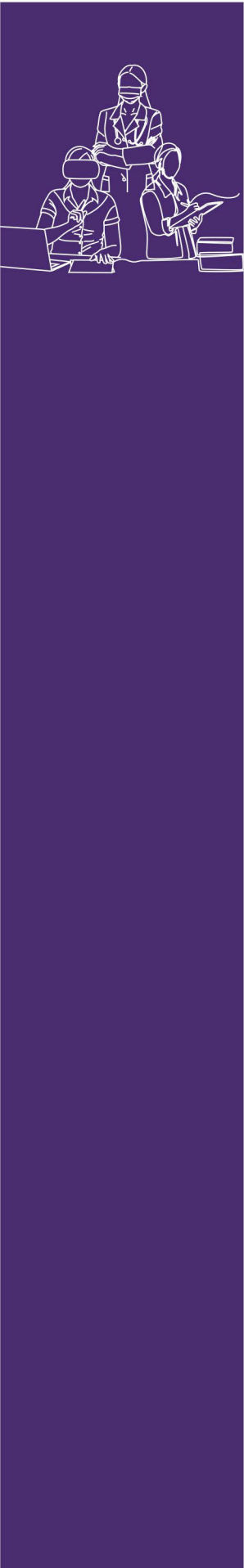
Challenge of Bias or Mindset block: She gave an example of how women employees face challenges in advancing to higher levels in their careers as there is a visible mindset block among the male colleagues. They saw women colleagues as the primary caregivers rather than breadwinners. She gave a pertinent example of the branch offices of a bank where male branch managers would rather not have women promoted as branch managers. The rationale was eventually, they would be required to go on maternity leave, and they would not be able to fulfil their responsibilities efficiently at work. As a result, though many women would join the bank, very few would be promoted as branch managers, and many would end up leaving the job. Women were not seen as primary breadwinners so giving opportunities of growth to men was assumed as fair and normal.

She cited an example of witnessing "unkind" behaviour towards women at workplace, where after maternity leave, women were often assigned fewer challenging tasks compared to their male counterparts, which may seem kind but in truth is only limiting the career growth of women. Women should be seen as ambitious as men. Assigning a challenging role to females returning from maternity leave can also boost their confidence and keep them motivated towards their work.

As a woman CEO, she used townhall meetings to counter this sort of a mindset. She emphasised on giving opportunities of growth to women and encouraged that many more women rise through the ranks.

Challenge of Isolation: As a woman CEO, she would see gender pushback as there was a predominance of male leaders in the company and women leaders were in severe minority. She would be the only woman CEO in the group where majority of the other CEOs would be American and Asian males. In such a situation, becoming part of the social milieu is a challenge and it becomes difficult to be part of the informal network. She added how important it is to overcome the mind block of feeling isolated and working to create formats for enabling networking on common grounds.

Policy Changes as well as Company Initiatives: She spoke about policy changes, such as increased duration of maternity leave and other initiatives related to childcare support. Though policies have established many positive initiatives, there is a need for improved infrastructure around childbearing and improved childcare facilities.



Apart from this, ecosystems to build confidence and change mindsets among women and men are equally important, which the individual companies can do. She referred to her own experiences of engaging with an NGO in a tribal area of Rajasthan. This NGO initially faced reluctance but over the years had empowered women enough to represent their community before the Prime Minister – playing a pivotal role in policy making. This transformation helped shift community views on women, building their confidence, allowing them to earn money, and giving them a voice in their community.

Barriers such as societal mindset and financial constraints are being addressed, and policies now support a balance between work and family. In the current scenario, there are efforts to ensure safety and security for women, including allowing women to leave for home during daylight hours or, if longer working hours are required, then providing necessary infrastructure ensuring safety.

Key Takeaways

Creating More Female Role Models: Focus on creating female role models at workplace by placing increased women in important positions. This triggers a change in the mindset where more women start to believe that they can also do it.

Quotas at Director Level of the Company Board: Having quotas for women is a promising idea to have more women directors on company boards. The presence of women at leadership level sets the course to bring in a change in perspectives and tonality in the decision-making process.

Open Conversations on the Mindset Block: Women should receive the same access to opportunities as men within a company, promoting gender equality at work and shifting employer perspectives on the roles of men and women in the workplace.

Data Driven Decisions: While helming the CEO position, she would ask her HR department to bring together data on percentage of women workforce in the company. If there were 30% women in the frontline profiles, she would look at the promotions to see if 30% of these were given to women. Based on that data, she encouraged to seek questions on why more women were not being promoted. Once the data comes out and speaks, things change rapidly in the organisation.

Sponsor a Woman: Mentor and support a woman colleague. She would put her subordinates who were women in important job positions. This also sends a message to the senior leadership at the organisation.

Message to Men: Change in mindset from employers' perspective is critical as well. Women should be given equal opportunity as men based on merit. The Indian society is such that women have to be out of the office during sunlight hours or must be provided with infrastructure to enable safe travel for women. Male colleagues should be made conscious that women are different from men only in this sense and not in terms of their ability, competitiveness, or ambitions. Hence, they are eligible for the same opportunities as men. Secondly, female workers may need more support during child-rearing years, in terms of flexible work hours or roles that allow them to work remotely during these years. Finding such roles and flexibility for female workforce will enable their retention as well as success at workplace.

After the discussion with Shikha Sharma, Chetan and Shikha together inaugurated the Gender-Ed Curriculum, developed in-house by TMF team in collaboration with Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality (IWWAGE) that supported TMF with the framework for it.



The session then was handed over to Mr. Sajid for moderating the Panel Discussion where women from different walks of life addressed a few pressing concerns in women empowerment. The panelists were:

- Dr Meena Gopal, Former Associate Professor at the Centre for Women's Studies at Pondicherry University, TISS.
- Anusha Bharadwaj, Executive Director, VOICE 4 Girls; Founder-Director, SoCh for Social Change; Ashoka Fellow, 2023; and Echidna Global Scholar, 2023.
- Gayatri Das Sharma, Co-Founder, Timshel Consulting; Visiting Faculty at the Indian School of Business.
- Urvashi Prasad, Director in the Office of the Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog.



Following are the narratives that shed light on the diverse experiences and achievements of each one of them:

Highlights



Ms. Urvashi Prasad

Director, Office of VC, NITI Aayog

"The solution lies in finding the right balance in the policies."

Urvashi rightly highlighted that women's participation in the workforce is a complex issue with many challenges. Informal work affects women more than men, making it harder for them to fully engage. It is not just about education and skills; but women need a supportive environment to work. Safety, reliable transportation, flexible hours, and good maternity policies matter.

Laws are in place, but making them work is tough, especially for the private sector. Everyone, the government, businesses and others, in the ecosystem must work together to create fair opportunities. The solutions lie in finding the right balance in policies to avoid unintended problems and ensure workplaces are inclusive and supportive for women's success. All agencies and organisations must work together.

She mentioned that her parents were of great support to her, and she saw both her parents managing their house together. She was privileged to have had equal opportunities and did not face discrimination. In this sense, family has a key role to play when it comes to enable equal access to education and employment for women. During the work years, finding support and identifying mentors in leadership is important as it enables support from the entire ecosystem.

Policies on Entrepreneurship: The policies focus on creating peer to peer networks for women entrepreneurs, providing mentoring opportunities, connecting with right agencies for funding and getting access to funds. The program on entrepreneurship starts from the school level, where the focus is on young girls who have an idea or innovation and encouraging them to find a logical conclusion for translating these ideas. More girls are coming up with such ideas for entrepreneurship. Social challenges also are being addressed by girls in this program.



Highlights



Dr. Meena Gopal

Professor, TISS (On Lien Pondicherry University)

"Women are last to be hired and first to be fired."

She started by discussing the historical challenges women faced in getting entry to factory jobs during the 19th century, highlighting the constant struggle they had to face. With modernisation or introduction of technology, women still find themselves disproportionately affected, being the first to lose their jobs.

Today the workforce is categorised into formal, informal, and domestic sectors. Informal work predominates, with women comprising 90% of this sector. Yet their contributions are often undervalued. The economic focus remains primarily on visible, paid productive work, neglecting the essential roles of reproductive and caregiving labour. This disparity means that women are frequently the last to be hired and the first to be let go in times of economic uncertainty.

She made a point on how men too need training, awareness building, empathy, and support in navigating patriarchy. Many young men are also victims of patriarchy. Father-daughter support structure is an idea that can be implemented on how fathers can support their daughters.

Affirmative action is important for the society to witness more women in formal workforce. Scholarships and incentives for talented young women are something that the corporates can strive to do. Apart from that, networking with other women, creating spaces of solidarity, opportunities of collaboration and building support systems for women by women are some of the ideas that can support economic empowerment of women.



Highlights



Ms. Gayatri Das Sharma

Co-Founder, Timshel Coaching and Consulting

"I was shocked to see a woman lifting a bookcase and bring it into my house because in India tasks like that are only done by men."

She started by drawing a comparison of India with U.S and China and explained the minor differences that existed but that the challenges were the same across the countries. She added that it was particularly interesting that even in the US (being a developed country), a sizeable portion of unseen and unpaid work is carried out by women.

Another fascinating observation she had was, in China, in less economically privileged sections of society, there is greater gender parity in the distribution of work and opportunities. For instance, women may be seen performing physically demanding tasks like lifting a bookcase into a house, which in India is traditionally considered men's work. However, in more affluent segments in China, gender stereotypes are more pronounced and dictate societal roles differently compared to India. Contrary to the popular stereotyping, gender parity is more prevalent in societies that were not well off economically.

Entrepreneurship: Addressing the question of low percentage of female entrepreneurs, she mentioned the main reason funding is disproportionately low for women than what goes to men. Deep rooted biases that we are unaware of are the primary reasons for it. Becoming aware of these biases is the first step to overcome them. Women who have been successful as entrepreneurs have been the ones that have built a village around them. Utilising the ability to influence, leveraging their network and having their own group of cheerleaders is what they attribute their success to.

Apart from this, women are often stigmatised when they spend less time with family and more on work. It is important to understand that work-life balance can be different for individuals. Removing stigma around work-life balance is necessary to win the internal battle or guilt that many women feel for working. Besides this, support from leadership is important. The senior leadership must produce more initiatives for women at work. When leaders support, others also start aligning with it.



Highlights



Ms. Anusha Bharadwaj

Executive Director, Voice 4 Girls

"Let's create cheerleaders among ourselves for constant encouragement."

Anusha spoke on the economic empowerment of women and the critical need for livelihood skilling programs. She highlighted that while technical skills are important, women often face more significant challenges related to safety and security, especially when navigating public spaces. She pointed out that societal norms often condition women to prioritise caregiving roles, which can hinder their ability to pursue education and careers freely.

She further added, the logistical barriers women encounter, such as inadequate transportation infrastructure, can prevent them from accessing educational opportunities or jobs located far from home. She praised initiatives like the Government of Telangana's KG to PG scheme, which aims to support women's education by establishing residential colleges and women-centric infrastructure.

She also stressed on the importance of creating support systems and cheerleaders for women, urging communities to provide constant encouragement and feedback and highlighted the significance of empowering women to overcome societal guilt and norms that may hold them back from achieving their full potential in education and employment.

Entrepreneurship: The biggest challenge for women entrepreneurs is fundraising. Second, consistent effort that is required in running your own business. Third, support system at home and at work. Ecosystem support is of utmost importance in the entrepreneurship journey.

These remarkable women made a significant impact at the conference with their strong presence and expertise in their respective fields. They not only shared inspiring insights but also offered a unique perspective on women's roles in policymaking, education, and business. Drawing comparisons between the US and China, they highlighted significant differences and similarities in how women are perceived and supported in these influential countries.

Their firsthand experiences enriched the session, making it a fruitful and enlightening event for all participants. Their contributions underscored the importance of diversity and inclusion in driving meaningful discussions and fostering positive change.



Voices from the Ground

Ms. Pallavi Aggarwal

Executive - MIS (ITEI), Tech Mahindra Foundation

"I am determined to become a strong advocate for equal opportunities for women in all fields."

Pallavi's journey with TMF transformed her from a woman with few female role models to a confident innovator. Initially managing MIS tasks, she quickly earned a role at the ITEI-East, Delhi, thanks to her colleagues' encouragement. Overcoming hesitance, she embraced her potential, driving herself to excel and garnering recognition for her efforts. Now, she is dedicated to mastering her craft, embodying the spirit of determination and growth.

Ms. Kajal

Entrepreneur, Ruchika SMART Centre

"As I am a transgender it was difficult for the society and my family to accept me but that didn't keep me away from pursuing my dreams. I tried my best and today I am proud of who I have become and I am thankful to TMF Ruchika SMART Centre for this unwavering support."

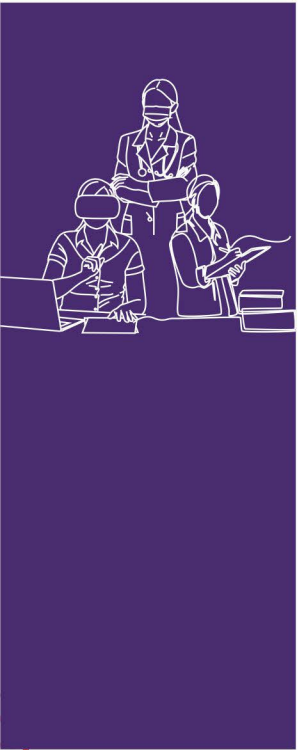
Kajal's journey from hardship to empowerment is remarkable. Despite family rejection and financial struggles, she pursued education and embraced her transgender identity. Finding refuge in the transgender community, she overcame exploitation and found mentorship under Sweetie Sahu. With support from Ruchika's training centre, Kajal opened her own beauty parlour, now earning a stable income and leading a dignified life. Her story inspires resilience and serves as a beacon of hope for others in the transgender community.

Ms. Komal Pal

Data Entry Operator, Sofia SMART Centre

"Returning to work after a lengthy gap wasn't without its challenges, but I was determined not to surrender. The Sofia SMART Centre became my guiding light, igniting a determination within me to pursue a better life for myself. I embraced the opportunity and committed to transforming my circumstances, striving towards a brighter future."

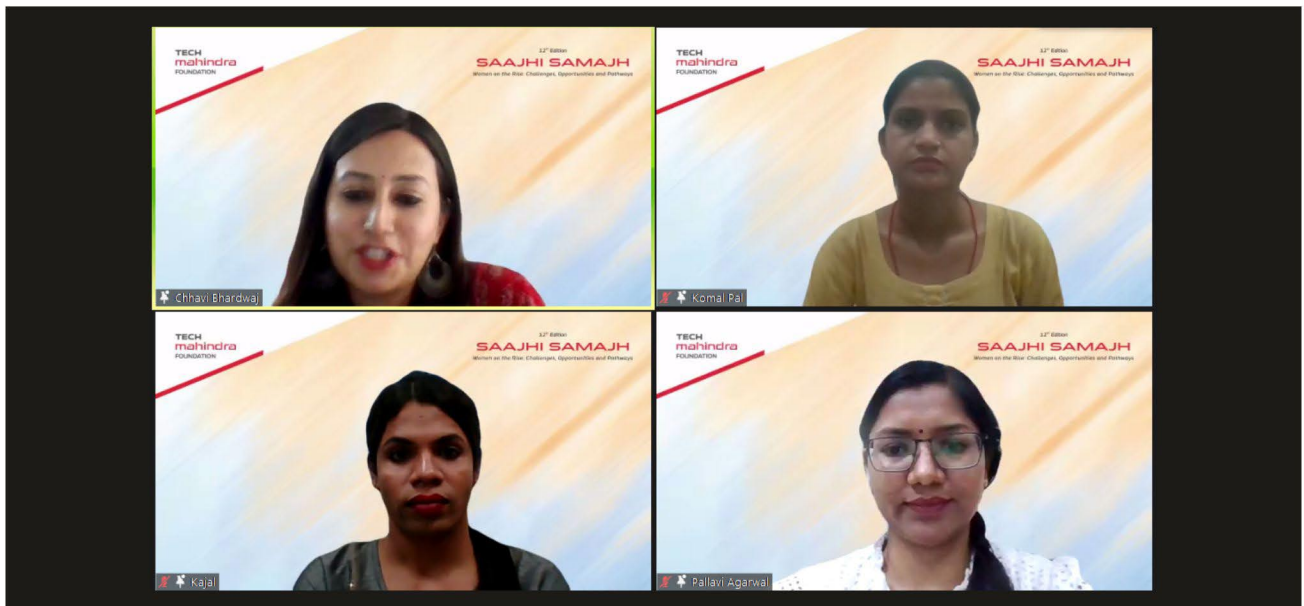
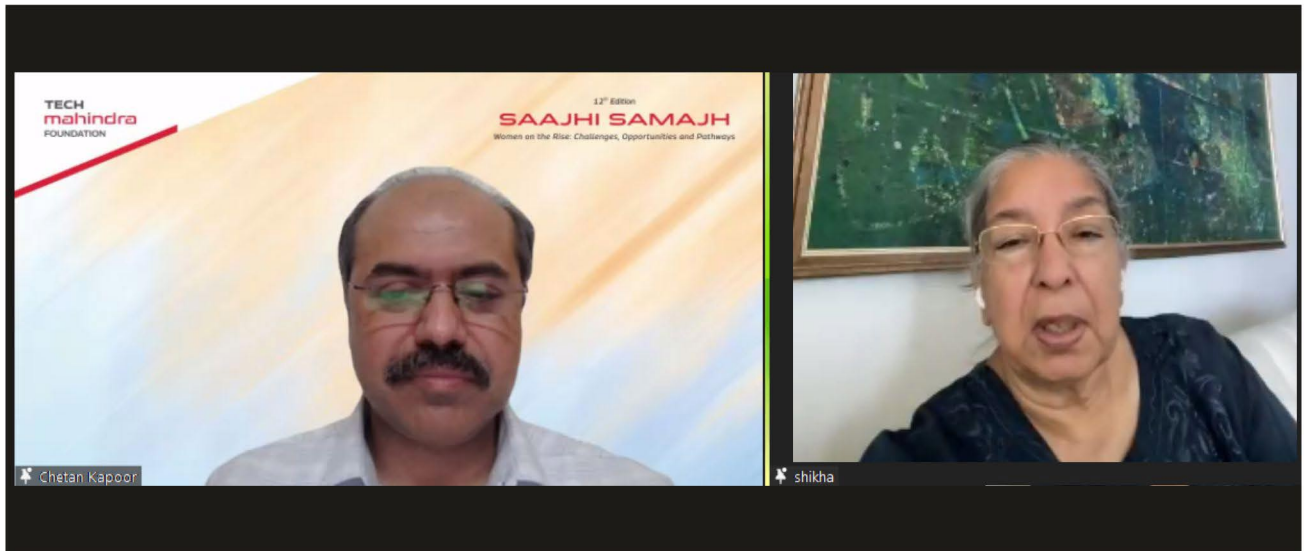
Amidst the challenges of single motherhood and a difficult divorce, Komal faced the daunting task of rebuilding her life. Hindered by lack of employment due to her husband's restrictions, she encountered a bleak job market upon seeking independence. However, her path brightened upon discovering the Sofia SMART Centre. Enrolling in the program, she not only acquired valuable skills but also reignited her self-assurance and determination. The support she received became the cornerstone of her journey towards empowerment and self-sufficiency. Today, she stands as an inspiration to many having triumphed over adversity to create a brighter future for herself and her family.



Conclusion:

In culmination, the Saajhi Samajh conference demonstrated to be a potent force for driving collective action and societal transformation. It inspired participants to redouble their efforts towards advancing gender equality and empowering women. Infused with a newfound sense of unity and purpose, attendees left the event motivated and empowered to implement concrete measures that promote a fairer, more inclusive society. Saajhi Samajh 12.0, held successfully on 9 May 2024, from 11:00 am to 12:30 pm, featured a virtual panel discussion that brought together stakeholders to reflect on and commit to gender equality, particularly focusing on economic empowerment. It served as a uniting call to dismantle barriers, challenge discriminatory norms, and foster an environment where women and girls can thrive economically at all levels.

Glimpses of the Event





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