

## **Society prospers when women thrive!**

A conversation with **Poonam Muttreja, executive director, Population Foundation of India-PFI**. Poonam has over 35 years of experience promoting women's rights, rural livelihoods, public advocacy, communications, and behavior change. She conceived and promoted the popular television serial, *Mai Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon (I, a Woman, Can Achieve Anything)*. Before joining PFI, she served as country director of McArthur Foundation in India. She serves on the board of several non-governmental organizations, and cofounded SRUTI, Dastkar, and Ashoka Foundation. She is an alumna of Delhi University and Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She is a regular television and print commentator in India and internationally.



## **Tell us about PFI's mandate and the approach you adopt to achieve that?**

I would like to quote JRD Tata, the founder of PFI, who said, "I have always believed that no real social change can occur in any society unless women are educated, self-reliant, and respected. Woman is the critical fulcrum of family and community prosperity." Echoing the thoughts and profound words of our founder, PFI believes that society prospers when women thrive and that reproductive rights are behind every woman's empowerment. At PFI, we address population issues within the larger discourse of empowering women and men, so that they are able to take informed decisions related to their fertility, health and well-being. We work with the government, both at the national and state levels, and with NGOs, in the areas of community action for health, urban health, scaling up of successful pilots and social and behavior change communication.

## **Population, health, and development, how would you describe the correlation between them?**

Development activities that highlight issues of health, hunger, and poverty should not be viewed in isolation, as they can often have a multiplier effect on other indicators of growth. The lack of access to health services and proper nutrition, especially for women and girls, percolates to the rest of the community and sets off a domino effect of adversities. For instance, all 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals are directly or indirectly impacted by family planning.

Access to contraceptives help in delaying, spacing, or limiting pregnancies, which is not only crucial for reducing risk and mortality of both mother and child deaths, but also improving their health, leading to long-term good health. Spacing births can also have far-reaching effects on the growth of the child, thus leading to reduction

in malnutrition and stunting among children under five years. Birth spacing also helps mothers continue their education and achieve their employment goals, as unintended pregnancy can be both a cause and a consequence of dropping out of school. These in turn can have an impact on women's participation in the workforce, productivity, and overall economic growth. Family planning is also a means to ensure that women have awareness, knowledge, and agency to control and manage their bodies and reproductive choices by accessing contraception.

**Not many NGOs think of using media series to address the social cause they work on; tell us more about the inspiration behind coming up with *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon* TV series?**

No health problem exists in isolation; there is a larger story behind every health issue, and this is governed by the social, cultural, economic, and behavioral contexts of the local community. To have a real and meaningful impact through our work, we wanted to address these social norms, and we wanted to do it in an innovative way. We knew that mass media has the power to reach out to the people in large numbers. In the past, PFI had used short films to communicate positive behavior; this was a positive experience, which confirmed that people were ready to engage in discussions around sensitive issues if they could relate to the messages.

Since content on television continues to be a powerful means of communication across rural and urban areas, we decided to make a television series that would raise awareness on vital gender issues. It sought to illustrate how skewed gender norms, including social and familial roles, result in negative health outcomes for girls and women, impacting the well-being of their families and society's overall progress. The series took shape as *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon* (MKBKSH), a soap opera on the lines of commercial soap operas in India, where storylines become an integral part of daily lives and the characters a part of extended families.

**In any gender-related work, the most challenging part is to question the patriarchal norms. What challenges have you faced on this front and how have PFI's strategy overcome these challenges?**

Patriarchal norms pose a barrier that not only affects the health and well-being of a woman, but also has a cascading effect on the growth and development of our country. In many parts of the world, including India, family planning is viewed as a women's issue. This skewed view on sharing the responsibility of family planning is not only unfair but also results in violation of women's sexual and reproductive rights and their health. Male engagement does not only mean use of contraceptives by men, it extends to their role as enablers and beneficiaries in the process of ensuring dignity, equal voice and reproductive rights for women.

Through MKBKSH we have seen tremendous changes in attitude among men. For instance, after watching the serial the percentage of men among respondents of our evaluation who believed it was okay to beat their wives went down from 66

percent to 44 percent. A group of men in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, turned from habitual wife-beaters into empathetic partners and singsongs across villages to spread the message of family planning, women's empowerment and gender justice.

**How would you compare or comment upon the media outreach vis-a-vis on-the-ground implementation projects?**

Both media outreach and on-ground implementation are advocacy tools that we believe are complementary. Implementation on ground is a direct intervention for communities, keeping in mind their cultural and social context and making them equal partners in social transformation. The impact of the media outreach may be twofold, to create an enabling environment for the implementation to be carried out, and to amplify the implementation and draw attention to the policy intervention that it necessitates.

**Your message as a woman leader to other women?**

Some of us are fortunate to be living in a time of watershed movements like #MeToo and #WithHer. But we must also acknowledge that this is a small fraction and there are millions more who go missing and remain unheard. We need to help and support each other, women need other women, we need them as role models, as confidantes, and as pillars of strength. Only when women have agency through collective action will they be able to develop the courage to smash the patriarchy. We also need to work with men—a change in their attitude toward women is the key to gender empowerment.

*(Interview compiled by Pooja O. Murada, director, Communications, S M Sehgal Foundation)*