

Address by Ms. Isha M. Ambani (Director, Reliance Industries Limited)

**Girls in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Day
India 2024**

Good afternoon, Ladies & Gentlemen.

And a very special Good Afternoon to all the young girls, the bright young minds who are torch bearers of the new India, attending the event.

It is a privilege for me to be addressing this event, for which I must thank the Department of Telecom, Government of India, the International Telecommunications Union (South Asia), the Innovation Centre, Delhi, and other agencies of the United Nations who are hosting the Girls in ICT Day, 2024.

We are living in times of exponential changes.

The world is changing, the world is innovating, and if we are to survive in this fast-changing world, we too must innovate.

Already, the way we work has changed, and it will further change.

So, for everyone present here today: Be ready to embrace the change. Be prepared to take up Science & Technology as career options because Science & Technology hold the key to the future.

The majority of future jobs are going to be in those realms. So, break the shackles to tradition... challenge yourself... and be the changemakers.

Dear Friends,

Technology has become an integral part of our daily lives today.

It is constantly reshaping the way we live, work, and interact with the world.

The rapid advancement of technology has triggered a Digital Revolution that permeates every facet of our society.

From Communications, Education and Healthcare to Business and Finance, the transformative power of technology is evident.

STEM in general, and ICT in particular, are the drivers of this phenomenal progress in technology.

As we move deeper into the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the role of ICT becomes increasingly pivotal, underpinning innovations in every sector and ensuring that our journey towards digital and technological advancements continues unabated and propel our nation forward.

Sadly though, even today, there is a gender divide in India's tech workforce.

According to NASSCOM, only 36% of India's tech workforce are women – blame it on age-old dogmas and societal stereotypes such as women are best suited as teachers and jobs involving soft skills.

A similar disturbing aspect is the drop in the number of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-focused roles.

Data from World Bank shows that women make up 43 per cent of the total STEM graduates in India, but account for only 14 per cent of all scientists, engineers, and technologists.

India has favourable demographics to make tremendous progress in this era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, also known as the Digital Era, and emerge as a world leader.

If we are to drive home the advantage of our demographics, both men and women should attain their fullest potential.

A male-dominated STEM / ICT landscape, where women are under-represented, will rob India of its opportunity to rule the roost.

We have missed the first two Industrial Revolutions and were merely playing catch-up during the third.

This era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has given us the opportunity to make amends.

We must rise to the occasion, we must exert ourselves, and we must excel. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming irrelevant.

So, for India to shine, more and more girls – the women of tomorrow – must enter the realm of STEM and opt for technology as career.

Because if we are to build the India of our dream, technology will be our driving force, and both men and women in Science & Technology must fire on all cylinders.

Dear Friends,

In the ever-evolving landscape of tech industry, the under-representation of women in workforce is a debilitating reality.

The gender gap does not only signify gender bias, but it is also a hurdle in the path of innovation.

Closing this divide is a strategic imperative, necessary for the industry's, as well as the society's, holistic growth.

While women make up 36% of India's tech workforce, their presence drops drastically as one starts looking up the corporate hierarchy. For instance,

- Only 7% women held executive-level positions
- Only 13% were working in director-level roles
- A mere 17% held mid-managerial positions

Even the new-age start-up ecosystem is grappling with the problem of dismal participation of women.

Limited access to funding and resources for female-led start-ups and businesses continues to contribute to the under-representation of women in leadership roles.

It is indeed an unfortunate scenario because women are no less suited to be leaders and change-makers than men.

And yet a woman's climb to the top is invariably a lot more difficult than a man's rise.

I personally believe that as leaders, women have an edge over men. Women have empathy and that automatically makes them better leaders.

A woman leader, as she climbs up the ladder, will inevitably carry the team with her.

I have heard my mother, Mrs Nita Ambani, a champion of women empowerment, say, time and again: “Empower a man and he will feed a family. Empower a woman and she will feed an entire village.”

I believe that what my mother says is true. Women are born leaders. Their innate selflessness makes them better leaders.

So, by denying leadership roles to women, we are denying ourselves the chance to realise our full potential.

Of course, there are signs of changes all around the world. But let me tell you that the changes must be systemic.

A token representation just to show diversity and inclusivity on paper will not make any difference.

Women employees must be nurtured from early on in their careers.

They need to be shown how their growth can play out in a company and how it will go a long way to help the company.

Friends,

To encourage increasing participation of women in STEM and ICT, and to bridge the gender divide in our tech workforce across the hierarchy, we need to design and execute a comprehensive strategy:

For example, strengthening our STEM curricula to promote equal participation is crucial. We must consult gender equality experts to ensure our learning materials are free of biases and resonate with both genders.

The government, under the stewardship of our visionary Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, is making alterations and necessary course corrections, and the results are already showing.

In the last decade, there has been a 6% increase in women's representation in the tech workforce.

However, we still have a long way to go to make it a 50-50 man-woman ratio in every sphere of technology and across hierarchies.

With the government doing its part, the industry too must chip in to catalyse the transformation.

Tech firms too must play their part, devising ways and means to ensure that the career of no woman engineer get stagnated.

Every woman gets the chance, like their male counterparts, to bloom to their fullest.

Dear Friends,

Let us pledge to transform our societal frameworks and educational systems to be more inclusive.

By empowering women through STEM and ICT, we can unlock untapped potential and inspire a new generation of women to lead in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Let this conference mark the beginning of renewed efforts to ensure that every young woman has the opportunity to pursue her dreams in STEM and ICT.

Equal contribution from our female population is essential to sustain our growth and compete on a global scale.

By empowering women to participate fully in these critical fields, we are not only bridging the gender divide but also enhancing the creative and innovative capacities that fuel development.

Together, we can build a future where innovation is driven by diversity, and where our daughters have equal opportunity to become the leaders of tomorrow.

Thank you!