

# CORPORATE SOCIAL FOCUS

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**SPECIAL EDITION**



## INTL' WOMEN'S DAY 2022: "GENDER EQUALITY TODAY FOR A SUSTAINABLE TOMORROW"



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**Swayantani Ghosh**  
VP, Communications & CSR Head,  
Technip Energies India



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**Ms. Gazala Paul,**  
Managing Trustee & Executive Director  
Samerth Charitable Trust



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Whole Time Director,  
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## A woman who knows the odds, still strives for the best



*In the fields of Chhattisgarh, working with farmers on improving farming techniques*

**T**he Managing Trustee and Founder Member of Samerth Charitable Trust, Gazala Paul is the epitome of what women in leadership roles are in India today. Her journey of over 30 years in the development sector spans across the extensive work done in areas of water conservation, disability rights, forest rights, accessing quality education for the tribals and urban poor, enabling women's role in local governance, and addressing the issue of violence against women. Her work across rural and urban India

has brought her closer to the vision of working for the community, with the community.

"I had the support of my family and that has always been my strength," says Gazala. She mentions that her father and his active interest in world peace besides his job always worked as a guiding force in her life. While growing up, most well-wishers and acquaintances advised her parents that their daughter could become a teacher, a banker, or even a doctor. However, she shares "I vividly remember, I had a discussion with my father about my career and he supported my decision of pursuing social work, a passion of mine". She affirms that her parents were always supportive of her desire to work in the development sector. "It was rare to see women in the field of social work back in the '90s. It wasn't a popular choice or sought-after career for many. Yet my parents were always supportive of my passion and motivation to work towards the upliftment of society".

Reading up on world history, watching movies based on historic events, and travelling is something she likes to do in her free time. She also credits the city of dreams saying- "my best teacher has been Bombay! Bombay taught me a lot: whether you are a millionaire or a ragpicker, everyone loves the humble vadapav. Bombay taught me, it makes a lot of difference to catch an 8.55 am local than to catch a 9.05 am local. How to behave, how to tackle problems, how to make friends in just 10 mins, how to behave on a global stage. Distance is measured in time and not in kilometres and that makes you value everyone's time. If you can survive the city you can survive the world."

Pursuing her passion, she did her Masters in Social Work from the Indore School of Social Work. Later she was selected for the British Chevening Programme to study 'Peace and Conflict Management' at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland. As part of her Master's program, she received the Mellon-Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Fellowship to assess the impact of the tsunami interventions and reconstruction processes on the intra-state relations in Sri Lanka and Indonesia/Aceh.

Her education as well as her experience of working with Oxfam Great Britain in the early days contributed to shaping her worldview greatly.

“Working with Oxfam as a project coordinator gave me a great chance to learn and helped shape me to what I am today. It gave me exposure to ecosystems in the development sector and the need for collective action to bring systemic change.” she states. When Gazala started working in the development sector, there were very few women as role models to get inspired from. She takes great pride in sharing that “we were one of the few selected women of that era who could contribute to development projects across the continent”. She goes on to share that in her initial days it was even difficult to find women working in remote locations or travelling alone without a male companion or colleague. Yet, from a very young age, she took charge of her life, taking active participation in the decision-making process in all spheres of her life. She says “when you are part of the change, you set an example for the generations to come.”

Keeping in mind the need to reach out to poor and marginalised communities living on the fringes of society in extreme poverty and without any access to their entitlements, she founded Samerth Charitable Trust in 1992. Her vision was clear, she would work directly with people and engage them in dialogue, participation and support them through various programmes. She decided to start working closer to home, to begin in Gujarat, and then take things forward. The impact was more important than numbers! She says- “it was my dream to simply see people build a better life for themselves and to reach that end, I knew I had to go out there and do something.”

Being an advocate of structural change in the education system, she started working with girls to provide them with access to higher education in rural and marginalised areas of Gujarat. Her work also includes research for setting up programs with the Baiga Community (Tribal Groups) in Chhattisgarh, on forest and water-based development. Later in the year 2016, Gazala was nominated to the State Planning Commission, Chhattisgarh Task Force.

“The free bird in me always wanted to fly and see the world around me, and working in the community gave me the opportunity to fly across the world to understand the socio-economic situation of the places, people, and communities at large. It has given me the freedom and liberty to work towards bringing about a positive change.”

Her work came into the limelight during the Gujarat earthquake in 2001 when she decided to work on constructing a semi-permanent or permanent house



**Education, their right! Children at the Rapar Campus, Kutch**

that was destroyed. After that, she initiated the first early education centers in the marginalized area of Ahmedabad along with setting up the Samerth Talim Kendra, a daycare center for children with disabilities in Ahmedabad as a response to the community's need. Under her leadership, 16 early education centers were set up in Ahmedabad, serving more than 400 children in the region.

A woman who always wanted to do something different, found herself always motivated whenever she saw the same zeal in other young girls of today's generation. It only strengthens her purpose to work even harder and create a better tomorrow for them. She has always taken up the issue of women being deprived of their basic needs and rights. Whenever and wherever she has come across this she has made it a point to intervene in her capacity and bring about change. Her work of constructing toilets on the demand of women in Nakhatrana, Kutch at a time when it was unheard of in the local community is only one such example.

After witnessing first hand the impact of the work carried out, Gazala has never stopped. Today her work in the areas of water management, disability, education, and livelihood of the marginalized community has made her the role model for many.

After the experience of working with vulnerable groups in Gujrat for over 10 years, in 2006 she expanded and directed her work through Samerth Charitable Trust towards uplifting the tribal community of Chattisgarh, especially those who come under PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups). Samerth initiated 100 Baal Mitra Kendras (early education centers) in Chhattisgarh for tribal students. It was during this time that she also focussed her energies on working with Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and formed the first Disabled People's Organisation for PwDs in Chhattisgarh. In addition, she also facilitated the First Individual Forest Right securement in the state of Chhattisgarh.



*A force to reckon with*

"What keeps me motivated is the participation of women, representation of women from marginalized sections, and their courage to make life better," says Gazala. Now is the time, and now is the place. The past is done, and the future awaits what we do in the now. "I want more and more women to be at the forefront so that they represent themselves. More notably, the women from marginalized sections of the society, who have been deprived of basic rights of food, water, shelter, and other basic entitlements. The change resides in the hands of the community, I can only provide the community members with the necessary tools to bring the change"-, says Gazala.

Gazala Paul was awarded the 'Phoenix Leading Lady Award' of 2019 – in the category of 'Social Change'. The work has impacted the lives of more than 60,000 people. She was also awarded the prestigious 'India Mahatma Award' for Social Good in 'Clean Water & Sanitation' for 2020. Recently, she has been recognized in the UNDP India 2022 Inspiring India magazine for her work on the revival of water bodies in Kutch over the last 20 years.

While discussing how far women have come in demanding the rights and exercising them, she expresses her views through a recent incident. She recalls "An insurance agent called me up, I picked up the call and after hearing me just say the word 'hello', the agent asked me to pass the phone to sir." She says we think we have come far in terms of setting the new norms or changing the established pattern or sacrosanct beliefs in society. Yet we have not been able to establish the fact that women can also be in the decision-making role and have the power and a say in taking the decision on various issues that govern our lives, even of our own finances". This incident took her back to her early days of a first job, when back in the

'90s men were not used to taking orders or advice from women. She shares an anecdote "Once I remember while travelling, the driver was aghast that how could a woman travel to a remote location to see a project without any male family member accompanying her, it was just not heard off". But when he saw the work she was supporting in the field, he was overwhelmed and said "women are no less than men".

She firmly believes that the demand of the hour is for more and more representation of women in every sphere of life, not only the development sector. The empowerment of the community and their collective voice, in turn, can bring positive change in society. She has inspired many women to fight for their rights and entitlement. She

says "I still have the same energy and enthusiasm as I started with. I feel extremely passionate about working with marginalized communities, especially women who have been unheard for years. While expressing her concerns she says that "the divide sometimes seems to be broadening, and women are still underrepresented in all walks of life." She wants to bring the attention of the world towards the demand for collective action. She says "our work should be directed towards ensuring equitable, inclusive opportunity and participation of all, especially women."



*My backbone! Gazala with father, the inspiration that's shaped her life*

Recollecting how we as a society worked together to fight against Covid, she says, the year gone by has taught me that - today's accomplishments were yesterday's impossibility. - Gazala Paul signs off with her own twist on the famous Rober Frost poem - " I have a lot of ground to cover and I have promises to keep, miles to go before I sleep"