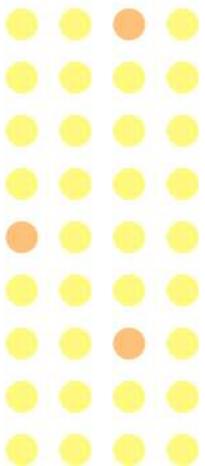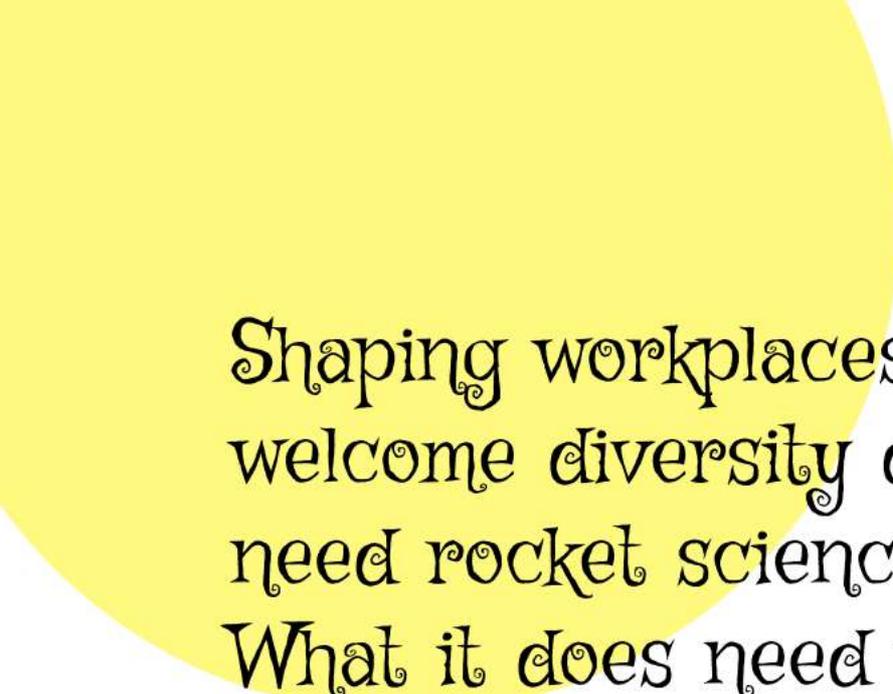Stories of
Inclusion

Shaping workplaces that welcome diversity does not need rocket science. What it does need is simple intentional effort.

We asked the Navgati network what inclusive behaviour for women looks like. And received a practical list of actions that don't take a whole lot of effort or resources.

Why did we do this?

For one, inclusion is the theme of International Women's Day 2024 & we wanted to contribute to deepening our collective understanding of the topic.

Secondly we've long felt that much of the conversation in this space actually revolves around exclusion…stories of when women felt excluded.

And while it is important to keep that dialogue alive, focusing only on a list of don'ts feels like a disservice to the individuals & organizations who are making a change…who are taking the small & large steps to make it possible for women to bring their complete selves to the workplace.

So that's the intent of this document:

- to celebrate the men and women who are acting to create more inclusive workplaces

- to help all of us understand what women really need to feel included (and surprise! not a single mention of roses & other tokenistic gestures)
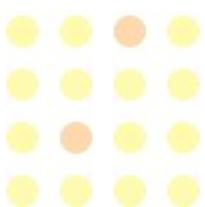
How did we put this together ?

The Navgati team reached out to women (and a small sample of men) in our networks & asked for stories of times when

- someone took an action that made them feel included

- they did something to make a woman feel included

We collected over 150 stories (with many women telling us how they'd never thought about this prompt & about how good it felt to recollect these stories).

Many stories were similar so we've culled them down to a set of 50 odd that are representative of the whole.

Some respondents wanted to stay anonymous so we're not attributing any of the stories to specific people. We do have a list of contributors at the end; profoundly grateful to all of you for your generosity & sharing.

Final provisos before we let you get to reading:

- This isn't intended to be a comprehensive document so please do share if there are other themes you're noticing. Write to **sunitha@navgati.in** & we'll update this document.

- The stories shared represent the reality for women working in the corporate sector at mid to senior levels. What needs to be done to improve lives of women in other parts of society is obviously very different & we're in awe of all the individuals and organisations working to make that change possible.
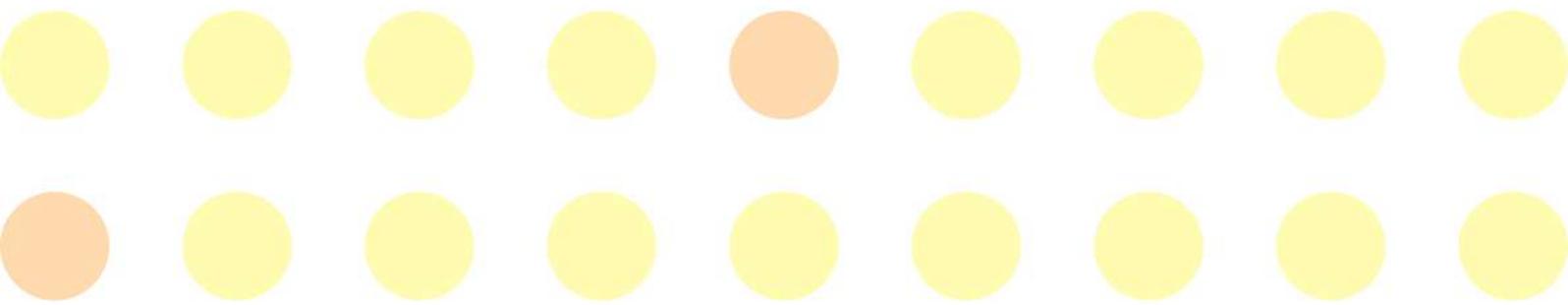
Ok, so here's what emerged in our analysis of these stories.

The most surprising? Apart from one theme of making reasonable accommodations (which in our opinion should apply to men as well), the acts of inclusion that women remember the most are what many men would appreciate as well.

We found this fascinating because so much of the conversation about the difficulty of including women seems to revolve around cab services & working hours.

Turns out that what women want, to give their best, is fairness; acknowledgement; psychological safety and managers who believe in them.

The managers who are able to provide these elements are able to create environments where women flourish, despite the gendered social expectations & pressures placed on them.

The themes

1	**Acknowledging her for her contributions**	Especially when there was no pressing need to do so (they'd left the team; their manager was making the presentation to management etc).
2	**Creating space for her to be heard**	It's not easy to speak up, especially when you're an introvert, or in a minority. Many women recalled with warmth the men & women who explicitly called on them to share their opinion.
3	**Demonstrating faith in her, even when she doubts herself**	There's enough data that shows that women tend to have unduly high standards for themselves. Managers who played Pygmalion (look up the effect by that name) and communicated confidence in the woman's ability are fondly remembered, even years later, as having had a major influence on her career.

4

Making her feel welcome in a new space/role

Joining a group in which you're a minority can be daunting and simple things like asking a new person out for lunch seem to go a very long way. Some of the stories here also had to do with being welcomed back after a maternity break (when they were feeling unsure about their ability; guilt about leaving their baby at home etc)

5

Making reasonable accommodation for her needs and the expectations from her as a mother / caregiver

The key here is really the word reasonable. All the women who shared were completely committed to their work; what they needed was flexibility in how they delivered those outcomes.

We did have one woman talk about how her company paid for a nanny to come with her to work but the majority of women just wanted a measure of thoughtfulness in scheduling meetings and in choosing team bonding activities.

The most applauded managers were those who make these accommodations without making it seem like a big deal. Also those who normalise taking time for childcare by sharing their own load with their spouses and talking about it.

6

Providing equal opportunity

This includes being fair; consciously looking to increase gender representation in the team; not making assumptions about the need for a reduced workload post maternity etc.

7

Supporting her when she is excluded by someone else

Many women had stories of where someone else noticed bias and stood up to be a bias buster. This could be a peer, a manager or a stakeholder.

8

Valuing her for her uniqueness

True diversity is not just about representation but also about creating a psychological environment where people feel acknowledged for their unique ways of thinking and acting.
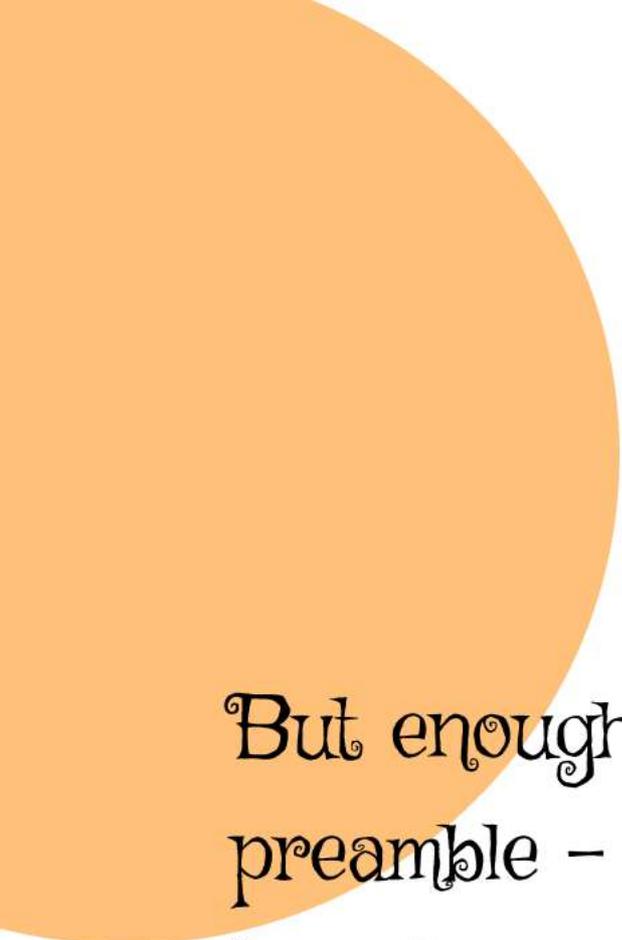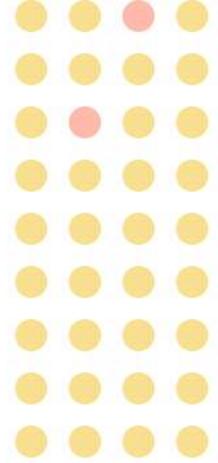
But enough of a long preamble – the meat of this document is in the stories so read on,

and do write back to **sunitha@navgati.in** - would love to hear what you think
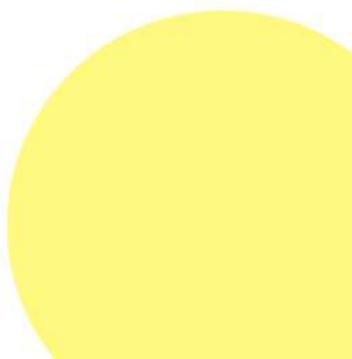
Acknowledging her for her contributions

A research team member had helped with data required for a presentation being made to the MD. While she had no role to play in the meeting itself, I invited her to attend to acknowledge her contribution in the MD's presence.

I had conceptualised and helped execute a project that I was super passionate about. It was very significant to the firm too. However, due to personal circumstances I had to move out of the country and as a result out of the firm too. When the project reached its culmination, the business leader acknowledged my contribution by name during a celebratory event. I wasn't physically present there (was not even part of the firm anymore) - yet it felt special to be acknowledged and told about it later.

We had initiated gratefulness or gratitude practice within the organization in the form of thank you cards. As a ritual every month we used to sit and write thank you cards to those we wanted to thank and distribute it across. During that time I was also going through some personal challenges and was on and off to office. Inspite of being absent when the ritual was conducted, there were always some 5-7 gratitude notes which were written and kept on my table. And that made me feel very warm and like I belonged to that place. In my absence also people were grateful or thankful for the contributions that I was making so it was really nice. It showed me that my team cared for me.

While my team is in Kolkata, I have been working remotely since the last two years. Before moving out of that role, my manager invited me to Kolkata for a farewell. Every one in the team (around 20 people) including the EVP-HR, made it to the farewell party, irrespective of their busy schedules. All of them sang, danced and enjoyed their heart out. They listened to my parting speech so intently and wished me well. I felt so touched and valued at that moment. It felt like my existence in the team mattered.

I have moved to a different BU within the organisation. It is a subsidiary of the same organisation. There is pretty much no interaction between the two BUs.

After a month or so of moving in to the new BU, I received a call from my former manager. My successor in the previous role had applied for an award in 'Employee communications' category and we had won that award. Since most of the work in this area was anchored by me, he invited me to a part of the delegation who would go to receive this award.

I was extremely touched. He and the new incumbent could have easily gone and received the award on the organisation's behalf. After all it was their idea to showcase this work for an award. But they went one step ahead to give me the credit. Inviting me to be a part of this ceremony and the celebration, made me feel included and valued.

Creating space for her to be heard
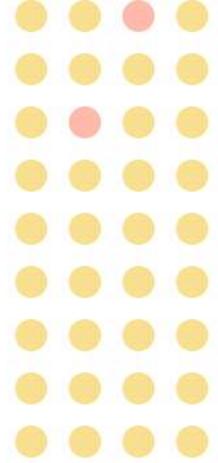
We had a meeting that was majorly leadership and I was comparatively junior in that group. There was a male leader and he saw my body language and saw that I wanted to say something and he asked "Do you want to say something?" I felt included, respected and valued and I can never forget that leader.

This was pre-covid times where remote work was not as familiar. I was the only one in my team who was remote and everyone else was co-located in Hyderabad. Meetings happened in a conference room and I used to join on call. There was no camera in the room, so I couldn't see the team.

Many times there were multiple conversations happening in the room which was hard to interpret. Or someone would go to the whiteboard and start explaining an idea. I always found it painful to be a part of these calls. But a team member recognised this and became my voice in the room. He would remind folks not to have multiple conversations. He would paraphrase something I might have missed. He would explain the idea written on the board. He would make sure to ask me my point of view. All this made me not just feel included, but ensured that I was able to create impact in my role. It was also a learning for the rest of us, so we could be inclusive in other hybrid calls that we attended.

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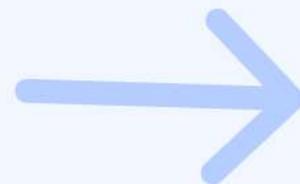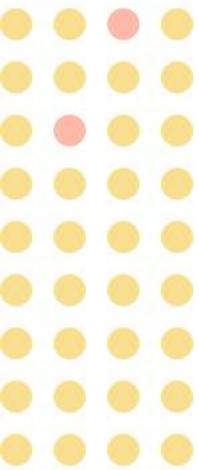
Whenever I want to seek inputs from the group, I give everyone five minutes at the start to jot down their points and then share the points via a survey or post-it notes. Once everyone has gone through the points, we start the discussion. I found this a very useful way to have everyone's voice and thoughts on the board before we got into discussions or debates. It also prevented giving the most outgoing / outspoken / confident / loudest person more voice than the rest.

I hesitate to take space in large meetings. I will not cut in with a loud voice and instead patiently wait for my turn which often never comes. This gets harder in zoom meetings with participants spreading over multiple pages of zoom screen. In one such meeting, my friend cut in and said, "I think A has something to say." (She saw me going off mute a few times) While it was a small intervention, it was very valuable for me. Kind of set the tone for what we can do for each other.

I often found myself hesitant in group meetings; would struggle to find the right way to interject and speak. Some leaders in meetings really pay attention… they noticed how i started to talk then stop, I was fidgeting or struggling to speak among everyone else speaking.

One particular leader, who also is familiar with my communication style and thinking style, would pause and ask me questions on what I shared to create more clarity. I was able to share not just my expertise but also my thought process. It wasn't just their ability to read the non-verbal cues I was displaying… they intentionally did or said something to help create the safe space I couldn't for myself.

Demonstrating faith in her even when she doubts herself

In my previous organization there was a business leadership role that opened up. I had been in an HR role all through. One of the business leaders who had worked with me openly said that "I'm going to give your name - you are ready for it and you should be applying and you should be the one getting it." I had so many doubts in my head - "Am I going to be able to do it? I would have to be in a roomful of different people who I don't know and very few women there"... etc.

He spent time with me to explain that gender didn't matter, that the leadership team didn't need me to be aggressive, that I could use my HR and the business knowledge I had acquired to make this happen. He was a brilliant sponsor; spoke to the leaders and called out what I did well. I think till date that's been the most inclusive behaviour I have seen somebody portray.

I had just got back to office after my maternity leave. Before I left, I had chosen to work in the capacity of a module lead because I needed the time, and couldn't travel often for customer meetings, which was accommodated.

When I came back, I assumed I'll be back to doing that role again for a while but my manager said that they already had a new assignment which he wanted me to own as a the overall tech lead and he believed I could do it. Through the course of the project, he made it possible for me to manage responsibilities at home and work, so seamlessly, that it made a huge difference in my career.

A few years ago I was the conference chair for my company for a Mobile World Congress. We were participating in one of the largest tech conferences in the world.

I had a team member in pre-sales who was an extremely motivated, brilliant woman but doubted her own capabilities. I knew this conference would help her recognise for herself that she was at par if not better than others in in the. So I reached out to her manager to send her with me to Barcelona for that week. He immediately responded that it would be impossible for her because she had little kids and also her in-laws to take care of. So that was it!

I was disappointed that she would let go such a great opportunity without even trying so I called her directly and asked her why she was missing this excellent opportunity. Her response was an enthusiastic- "Absolutely! I would love to go!"

I shared with her how stunned I was after her manager told me it was impossible given her family situation. She confirmed that he hadn't even asked her!

She did come with me eventually. This year she is moderating a session on AI and 6G at this conference. I'm just so proud of her for the distance she has come from 2018 when she almost didn't come to the conference to today where she will be presenting and moderating in front of about 20,000 people.

One of my women team members always used to ask for feedback on what needs to be improved after every project. I realized that I am giving her a lot of inputs on improvements but missing out on acknowledging what she has done well. I reminded her to always first ask for what went well and also started acknowledging her for her strengths. This really built her confidence and conviction over time.
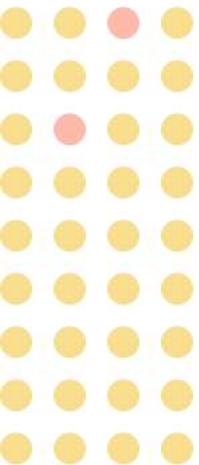
During my performance appraisal time, my manager called me in to give me feedback. While discussing various points, he said this "So many times, people in the team give some great ideas, and finally say you had suggested this. Is there a problem with having the limelight or a spotlight over yourself. Next time I'd like to hear your ideas from you, and not from someone else"

I was about to return to office post maternity leave. I was a mess the evening before I was to join back because I felt I didn't belong at office and I had this "mom guilt" of leaving my 6 month old behind. I called up my then manager and told her "I can't do this, I don't think I'm going back to work, I cannot come to work". All she said was "it's okay, take a breath and tomorrow come to my house. We will go to office together. You go and meet your colleagues and friends".

And that's exactly what I did. She slowly eased me back into the game and very interestingly she gave me a very challenging project. As I was working on that project I realised that it felt like I had never left. She made me realise that in spite of a gap of 6 months I hadn't lost my mojo and I always had it in me. She completely believed in me and that trust and that belief is what made me feel included. I felt a sense of belonging.

Barely six months into my first job, my boss quit. We were HR business partners for a large service line. I was very worried because of how well he connected with all the business leaders. I was sure I'd never be able to build those connections since, unlike him, I didn't smoke and didn't go on smoke breaks with anyone.

When I voiced out this concern to him, he reminded me that the business head of our service line as well as his own HR boss were both women who had grown exceptionally fast in the organisation without ever having smoked. He reassured me that it was just a matter of time before I figured out my own way of connecting with people and that I shouldn't worry too much about it. This conversation early in my career helped me be myself wherever I have worked since.

Making her feel welcome in a new space / role
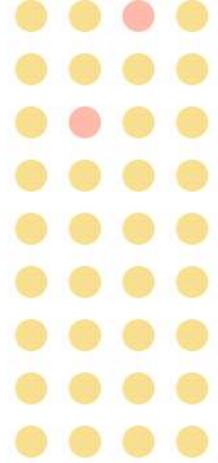
We consciously hire women leaders from outside. Whenever there's an announcement of a woman leader joining, I usually reach out and chat. Since we are a relationship-driven firm, I find that newcomers struggle with making an impact without having enough network. My offer to them in the first chat is, "If you are stuck and you don't know who can help with X, feel free to buzz me. I can point you to / put you in touch with someone who might be able to help."

On my first day at work, I was greeted by the whole team at my desk which was made ready and had little personal messages and thoughtful welcome gifts (like a chocolate, a flower, a care package with essential stationery that's gold for a trainer like markers, extension numbers of all the team members, etc).

They all kept me company through the day, took me to lunch, shared their food with me, even accompanied me to the transport desk for a drop home. I also saw my name added to the org chart on day one. That day, I was invited to a global roadmap discussion call and I saw my name updated in the charter. I have never ever (before or after) felt so much a part of the team on day one as I did in that organisation.

My business leader formally introduced me in a Townhall of 1.5k members. It was special because I was not feeling too important and was not expecting it. That gesture enabled me to move ahead with confidence as I was taking on the leadership position for the first time.

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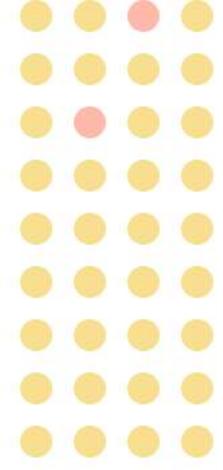
I was on a career break for more than a decade due to personal reasons. When I planned to get back into the workforce, I was so scared that I would be a misfit. But, when I joined my current organisation, the team welcomed me with open arms, were so friendly, and genuinely interested in getting to know me as a person.

During our regular meetings, we have a fun activity where we call out how well the other members have done and what we admire about each of them. We also have the buddy-up initiative where we connect to one member and get to interact personally with them, just to know more about them as a person.

I moved from a career in IT to assessment and facilitation. This move was complicated by the fact that it happened during Covid. My manager did a lot to make me feel welcome - she was leading the country wise learning need analysis and could have run these conversations with leaders herself but she made it a point to include me in all conversations. She would, without fail, introduce me right at the beginning when no one even knew my name or who I was. Sometimes leaders would dive into discussion but she would pause before responding and ensure I was introduced. I felt so included when she did that.

I joined a new division 2 years back under a senior female leader. She was the ex-COO of the firm with many years behind her, so practically everyone in the 3000 ppl division knew her. And without fail anytime I was with her she introduced me to everyone around. Knowing no one in the division, except her, this small act on her behalf made me feel super included.

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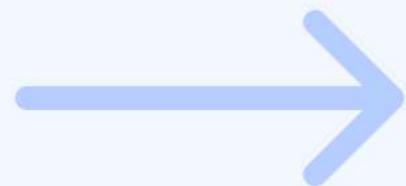
When I first joined the workforce more than three decades ago, I remember, as a new graduate who joined a large organization, the trepidation that I was feeling. Mingling with people who were so many years my senior, so much more knowledgeable on the work that we were doing and so forth.

We were a group of about 40-50 people. We were housed in a single building and the team had converted one of the conference rooms to become the lunch room and a lot of people would bring their lunch and sit down and have their lunch together. Initially I was not so comfortable going and sitting there and having my lunch with them but whoever was walking over to the lunch room, would stop by my cubicle and say, "hey, you want to come for lunch?"

That made me feel so comfortable that I could just walk there and sit down. The conversation was nothing about work. It was about anything and everything with a lot of laughs, lot of camaraderie building. So for a newcomer like me I think that created an atmosphere where I got to know people who I was not directly working with in a social setting. I've consciously tried to replicate this in all the teams I have led subsequently.
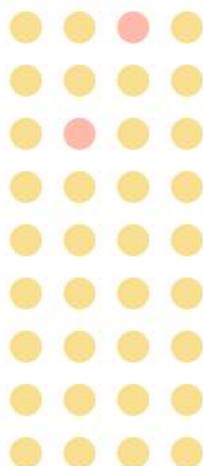
Making reasonable accommodation for her needs

I am a senior leader working in a leading IT company and was assigned a project that involves working with overseas clients. The client asked for a stand up call each day at 2pm IST. This put me in a dilemma, as I am a single mother and this was the time I needed to pick up my children from school and drop them to day care. So I spoke to my colleague and asked him to stand in for me.

The client noticed this and asked my colleague why I was not available. The next day I got a message from the client mentioning the call had been moved to 1pm so that I could attend!

for leave, I don't ask for reasons, understanding fully well that it could be biological factors, family issues or logistical constraints at home. They don't feel judged. At one time, I decided we would wear uniforms. They were hesitant to move away from their usual dressing. I managed to find vendors who would customize the uniforms as per their requirements (what they felt was comfortable for them)

I primarily have women working with me. So by tweaking the work timings slightly and offering flexibility (based on their need), the institution started working more effectively. When they ask

I remember one of my managers would really empathise and have a lot of respect for the number of roles a working mom has to play. He would acknowledge how tough it is and sometimes how unfair it is for a working mom. There wasn't sympathy, there was just a lot of acknowledgement and he would hence be willing to make a lot of accommodations without making it sound like a favour. Small things like when he would give us a task on a Friday he would specifically call out that he didn't want us to work over the weekend. These simple actions made me feel that I could play all my roles and yet not feel guilty.

When I was relocating to Gurgaon with my 2-year-old, I told the same manager that I would need some accommodation in the first two weeks, and his response was "It goes without saying; do what it takes…" I would get the same response any time that I had any personal emergency. He wouldn't preach, he wouldn't try and tell me how I should balance things. Just trusted that I would do the right thing and only offer support.

There are different kinds of women who have made different kinds of choices so I try to not ask women about their choice of whether they want to be married or not, whether they want to have kids or not.

There are female colleagues who would not join us for any dinners and outings. I would give them reassurance, and say that I understand that you can't make it for any of these late night parties and that is perfectly okay. I had one person profusely thank me for understanding and share that working itself is a lot for her and these outings and parties she just can't do.

I also asked her to tell me how we can include her – asked if we can do meetings over lunch or stuff. I continue to try and see how I can include someone who cannot do late nights.
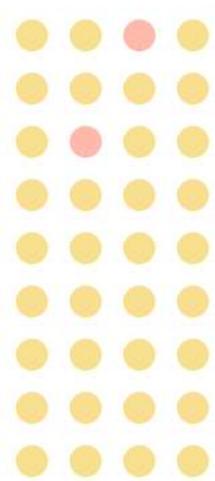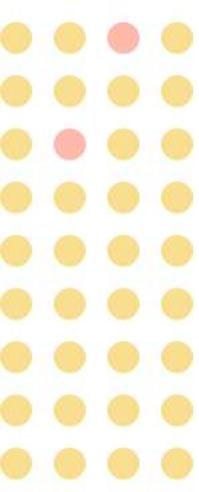
We were scheduled to have a weekend offsite and planning session at a resort in the outskirts of the city. I had a team member who had an 8-month-old baby to care for and was hesitant to travel for the weekend as her child was being wholly breastfed then. I ensured we had booked a hotel with a day-care facility that could care for her child. The conference room we booked was on the same floor as the daycare and I ensured that the session agenda had breaks every 90 minutes. I invited her baby to come along with us. We also had an office car on standby the whole weekend should there be a need to travel back to the city. We all took turns to check in on her baby through the day and made sure dinner wrapped up by 10:00pm.

She was an important team member and we were not going to let her miss the fun and time together.

We have been working from home ever since I joined. I joined in 2022 and recently we were asked to go to office twice a week. My suggestion was Monday and Friday because my husband goes to office the other three days and we have a son at home. We don't have any other help at home, it's just the three of us, so we have to balance between my husband and me.

Although my manager preferred Tuesday and Wednesday, I shared my preference and constraints with him. He took that into consideration and also checked with other team members (who were ok with my suggestion). While my manager felt that Monday would be tough for him because he's really hands-on with his daughter and at home, he was willing to meet us halfway and that meant a lot to me.

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I work with a Pakistani colleague who is pretty committed to her namaaz time calls. So often times it has happened that we have a spontaneous meeting then she may take off 5 or 10 minutes to go complete her prayers and come back. I think that's absolutely okay and acceptable for someone to step out. We try our best to not schedule meetings to clash with her prayer timings. And if she does have to go and if it is clashing with a spontaneous meeting then it's absolutely okay for her to step out for 10 minutes. Because I work in a community organization there are prayer mats that are available and it is okay for staff to move into a classroom or a library if no one is using it. As an organization and colleagues we create a space for people to practice who they are and their values in the best way that it doesn't disrupt the organization and the team time together.

There was a time in my professional career when I was working out of a warehouse within a leading manufacturing facility. We were about 25 people working out of the warehouse office and at any point we were just about 3 women. We did not have a ladies restroom in our area and had to walk about 5 to 7 minutes minimum to the admin office to access one. Initially none of us made noise about it about it at all but it soon became uncomfortable. I was a fairly senior resource amongst everyone there and I carefully and subtly started letting my peers and HR know about the inconvenience that we 3 ladies would face. While they heard me out it eventually required some serious focus and escalations from immediate management, facility management etc to agree to build a ladies restroom within the warehouse office. My action in many ways has helped other women who work out of the warehouse office today.

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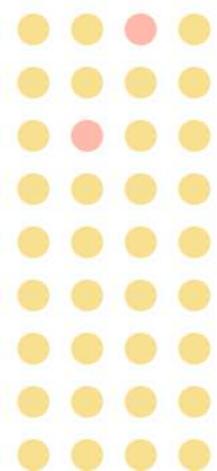
This is a story from a time when laptops were not so common. I worked in a manufacturing company in the FMCG sector and was responsible for market research and media for the company.When I got pregnant, I planned to work till the last day before I had to go to the hospital for her delivery as I wanted to make the most of my 3- month maternity leave after the baby came. But two months before my delivery date, I was told by my OBGYN that I needed to get a small surgery and not be on my feet for long periods of time. I was worried that if I took my maternity leave at this time, I would only have one month with the baby when he/she arrived.

I spoke to my manager to share the news...he asked me what I would like to do in these two months and I said I would ideally be able to work while at home. He called me back with the approvals for shifting my computer to my house - I got to work and to get my full maternity leave.

The customer support team I lead has unpredictable working timings where mandating a fixed clock-in and clock-out timing is impossible. We did have a late night cab service to ensure safety for the women in our team. However they were finding it difficult to avail the service since often they did not have the required approvals taken in time. This resulted in leaving work incomplete in favour of safety. We removed the need for sign ups and approvals to avail this service. Providing this flexibility made utilising this option so much more convenient.
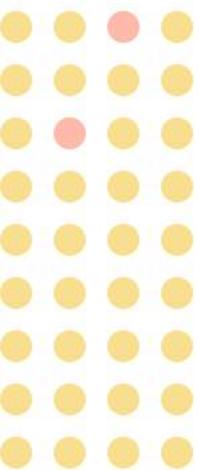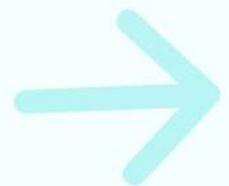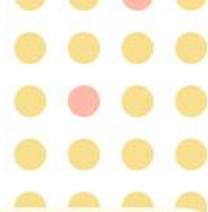
So a couple of years back, I stepped into a global role, which basically meant that I had stakeholders sitting out of US and Europe. One of the things that I was worried about is that we'll have meetings that would get organized at times that would not work for me and I would miss out on stuff.

I spoke to my mentor and he said "people are used to doing things a certain way. They're not consciously thinking about the time zones other people are in. If you want them to include you, you may actually have to tell them or ask from them what is it that you need to feel included"

So I asked my manager that when planning senior stakeholder meetings, could he set them at a time that worked for me. And if that was not possible, could he record them or give me a brief about what happened. It felt really awkward for me to ask this for the first time but my manager said he was more than happy to actually do that.

So that was what happened going forward - if the meeting was set up late, he would set up time with me the next day. His openness to actually do this work made me feel really included and also gave me the confidence to ask people for more if I needed to be included.

For example, one department lead set up a meeting that would go up to 10:30 at night. For me that did not work because I've got kids, there's dinner time and all of that. So I asked him if it was possible to break this meeting into two parts so that we wrapped up by 8:30 pm on both days. He was more than happy to do that - he had set up this meeting because that's the way that he had always done it in the past, and he didn't realize it would be inconvenient or he wasn't sure what the alternative was. And because I offered him an alternative, he was happy to take it.

Providing equal opportunity
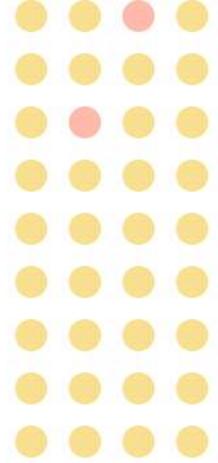
This happened in my first job..I joined in March, and was pregnant in December. During my ninth month of pregnancy, there was an assessment day at work. This was an evaluation of all nominated candidates for promotion. My manager told me that he wanted to nominate me. He told me that I could opt out if I wanted as the assessment would be quite demanding...physically and mentally. I was up against many tenured people and the day was quite long ...14 hrs to be precise.

He could've nominated anyone else, considering that I was anyway going on maternity leave soon. By nominating a full term pregnant woman for a hard assessment, he showed what inclusion means. I was not only nominated, but also promoted that day; becoming one among 40 people promoted out of over 300 nominated candidates. Till date, it is one of my favourite memories

When hiring for super specific engineering roles, we wanted more women applicants at the top of the funnel and that was not happening.

Knowing from research that women tend to not apply unless they have an 80% or more match to the JD, my Head of Engineering colleague (also female) and I added a line to the JD, saying something to the effect of, "We are prioritising for diversity in application; if you are looking at this JD and thinking you have even as little as a 40% match, please do apply. We will keep our interviewing process rigorous, so don't worry about not deserving the role. We don't do that to you. Just don't hesitate to apply."

The number of women applicants went up significantly. And we got a lot of warmth for that addition, during interviews.
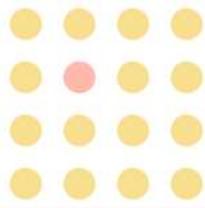
I was returning back to work after a short break after my baby. That was not a time where maternity leave was celebrated. In fact, more more often than not it was frowned upon. It was seen like this act of privilege that women somehow got.

Most of the recruiters didn't even take my resume forward because of this break. Even in places where I got an interview, it almost always revolved around these seven or eight months of break and how I intended to come back to work because I had a child.

I had almost given up my dream of getting back to work and and at that point in time I got this interview call. I went in assuming it would flow the same way. But to my pleasant surprise, the woman leader who interviewed me never even asked me one question about this break. Her questions were only around my experience and skills. It was just a professional to professional talk, nothing about maternity leave. The only question she asked was "This role may need some extra work hours. Are you ready?"

While I was constantly trying explain my long maternity leave, she said, "why are you being apologetic about anatomy? I mean, only women can give birth. There's nothing that you or I can do about it. We don't have to talk much about it as long as you bring in the quality of work that is required. We're all good."
Every single assignment that I was given had nothing to do with whether I was coming back from a work break and was just on capability. There was no other lens that was put on to it. And for that reason, I think she continues to be my mentor and that organization that I worked for is my all time career high.

My manager and every other team member is based out of North America. I am the only Indian in the group. What I found really inclusive was how transparent my manager is - she would take decisions based on what she thought was best for the team. But she would bring even the smallest of these decisions in the team meeting and vocalize her plan and open the forum if someone had any ideas. I knew what opportunities were coming in the team and why someone was being given those. In this team I always felt included and positive about my team members.

When I was setting up a team I had a mandate to recruit 4 analysts and I put out just another VC analyst recruiting standard post on a job portal.I ended up getting 500-600 resumes, 99.9% of them were men, consultants, bankers, working at start-ups etc. It just baffled me that no women from similar backgrounds applied. So while we continued interviewing the men, I also reached out to my network and encouraged young women that I knew to actually apply for the program. I also reached out to young talented men in my network and asked them to encourage their friends/sisters/girlfriends to apply and we ended up getting some applications directly from women.

When I interviewed the women, they were absolutely fantastic. I asked them why they had not applied to the program and all of them said that they saw the job posting, they heard about the analyst program but they didn't apply because they thought they were not qualified enough. In contrast, many of the men had applied even if they were not qualified. I asked them why they applied and they said "we just wanted to take a shot (kya jaata hai hamara)".

So we all know about this gap – women don't apply even when they are qualified. But in order to bridge the gap, we need to put in that extra effort to figure out how to give equal opportunities to women, especially when you know that capable candidates do exist. I remember having a conversation with a recruitment person about this and they said we would like to be meritocratic from the pool that applies, but we can't make women apply and I feel that response is not good enough.

Given the little extra effort we put in, we ended up giving offers to two men and two women and it turned out great.

At one meeting, I came in and all the seats at the main table were already taken. I didn't feel comfortable asking for space so sat down in the outer circle. One leader noticed and pulled up a chair and made space for me at the table - I still remember this as a quiet act of inclusion that had a big impact on me.
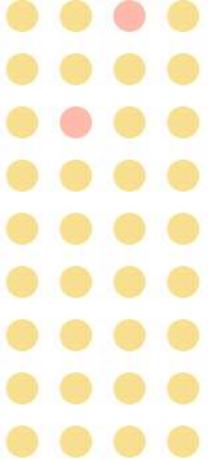
Supporting her when she is excluded by someone else

I was once working in an extremely hostile work environment where I was the only woman leader amidst three other male counterparts. Very early on, I noticed a general disdain among the men leaders (and most other men on this project) towards most, if not all, women team members.

The culture was plain horrid. It included all kinds of gossiping, name-calling, barbs and insults etc. While I was not intimidated by these bad behaviors, I noticed other women in our project becoming muter and disengaged over time. In meetings, I noticed that when they did venture to speak up, they were shut down by the senior most leader and everyone else ignored this behavior.

I was especially shaken when I noticed that a young consultant who I admired as bold, intelligent and driven began to show signs of disengagement. I decided to intervene and so, in a meeting I took a pause and invited the inputs from this young woman. When she took the opportunity and began speaking, the same senior leader cut her off. I interrupted him and said that I noticed he had not let her complete and that he should hold off his views until she gets a chance to finish. I then invited her to continue.

Once she finished, I demonstrated that I had actively listened to her and built the conversation on her shared thoughts. When the senior leader tried again to derail the conversation, I took charge and brought it back to the topic at hand requesting him to complete one thing on the agenda before moving on to other areas. Eventually, everyone got the message.

Things changed somewhat but nowhere near how it should be. Since then, I have stuck a quote next to my desk that is attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. It goes, "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by bad people but the silence over that by the good people".

I once stood up against my boss for making a very gender based remark to my team member in my absence ("if you cannot do such a simple task, it's better to get married and stay at home").

The minute I got to know, I decided to take this matter up and not let this go by. I arranged a meeting and told him that this behaviour was not done. He had the right to be upset, but he shouldn't have made that remark. As a result, he apologized to my team member.

Once we had an event where we had hosted all the top performers of the organization and it was a party where alcohol was being served. Since I had some escalation at work I reached the venue late. It had been a very hard day for me so I went to the counter and I asked for a beer and then I realised that it was a forum where it was mostly men.

There were hardly any women, and none of them was drinking so I could feel the eyes on me when I asked for beer. But two other leaders noticed my discomfort and immediately came up to he counter and also picked up alcohol. That is when I felt you know comfortable and included and that has stayed with me

There was one very bad experience I had with a woman boss who tried to exclude me at all times. My support came from another manager (I was reporting to two people) who stepped in and made it possible for me to report directly only to him and not to the lady. I felt very protected and safe.
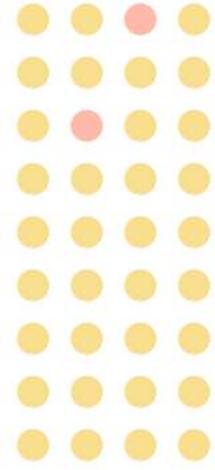
When I was a doctoral researcher, there was an older man who would attend all the public talks on wildlife and conservation held at the department. The few times I had interacted with him, I found that he would constantly cross personal boundaries and make comments about my appearance or relationship that would make me uncomfortable. After those early interactions, I would avoid him whenever he was in the department.

Once, however, I found him talking to a junior researcher in the department, slightly removed from the rest of the crowd that had showed up for an event. I also noticed that the young woman looked visibly uncomfortable but couldn't find a way to get out of that situation. So I enlisted the help of a friend, walked over and interrupted the conversation with an excuse that allowed the woman to leave.

Upon further conversation, it emerged that he had made quite a few other younger female researchers in the department uncomfortable. I believed then that this issue needed to be brought to the notice of the administration.

I spoke to the chairperson of the department, and brought the issue to her notice. The other young women confirmed the story, which resulted in this man being banned from attending the public talks organized by the department.

There was once an opportunity to get certified on a particular tool – it was very appropriate for me but I was not included in the group that was nominated. While I felt disappointed, I didn't say anything. A colleague of mine spoke to my manager and explained why it was important for me to be included – which I subsequently was. I remember that with a lot of gratitude.

Valuing her for her uniqueness

I was onboarding a well-qualified, senior technology business leader- a woman of colour– for a high profile role in a team that was predominantly white males. They called themselves the "Elites" having worked together for so many years and often exchanged "inside jokes" in meetings oblivious to how it made others in the room feel excluded. Having seen that, I was concerned about her experience while settling into this team. So during onboarding I chose to do a few things out of the ordinary.

1. I met with her a few days before onboarding and briefed her about her direct reports, their backgrounds, experience levels, strengths. Also spoke to her about the business challenges she had been hired to solve and some background context.

2. I helped her setup proactive connects with her peers right in the first few days so she could break ice and they could see the value she was bringing in.

3. I ensured I had one on ones with her proactively to see what other support she would need to settle in.

She was working remotely from California due to her personal obligations while everyone else was working in Seattle. These one on one connects helped her build relationships in spite of the distance and very soon she had developed a great bond with this group. She and I remain dear friends to this day.
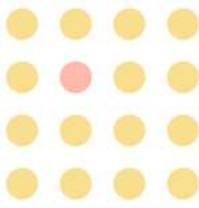
In almost all my meetings , I used to end up being the only woman at the table . Hence my presence and absence would be extremely visible. There was a time when I was leading a very large transformation engagement globally but I personally was going through a difficult situation at home given my mother's ill health. I would miss some important meetings & discussions if we were in the middle of her treatment.

I would often hear jibes and remarks from my peers regarding my unavailability but my boss stood by me and always valued what i brought to the table instead.

This behavior not only made the entire leadership develop a sense of empathy but it made me realize that while we expect people's lives to revolve around work, it's important to understand that work is just one aspect of a person's life.

This also made me appreciate all caregivers be it men or women and therefore I make to a point to give them the level of flexibility needed to help them bring their best versions to work.

Many times I have been called out for being different in the ways I express a problem/ solution and at times even ridiculed for being too passionate about my opinions. So naturally self doubt and my already inherent impostor syndrome collaborated to make me feel insignificant in a corporate world. Until that day when a leader I worked with approached me and said she wanted me to review her presentation. At first I was confused, as it wasn't connected to my body of work. So naturally I asked her why she was making that ask. She said "because you think different from me and I value your perspective"... that one line has forever changed my perspective on how we can make each other feel included at work.

→

I had just started working as a freelance consultant in my mid 20's and I had a very senior consultant who was very established, both as a teacher and practitioner of OD and OB practices. She saw me do a theatre workshop with a group of rural women leaders and invited me to join a collaboration with 2 other women professionals who were again much older to me at that point.

That was a very interesting experience in running a corporate workshop program for several years. There were many points at which she made me feel included.

One, that she specifically wanted my diverse experience to be brought on the table and so she would often ask me for my opinion on what i would do in this part of the design or what I would recommend and really receive my ideas without judgement. The other way I felt included was the fact that I was on such a diverse team but we always had a protocol of checking in and checking out before any process. Also each person was asked to bring in their strengths (like body work/drama/outbound learning) and all the ideas were weaved together to create something new.

It really built my confidence in those three years.

My current organization is a very inclusive one. For example, when hiring, we dont talk about "culture fitment", we talk about "culture addition". So from the beginning everyone knows they are bringing something new to the culture that adds value.

What I also like is that everyone is encouraged to bring their whole self to work. Meetings start with an opportunity for people to share what's going on for them eg "my child didn't sleep well" or "I had a bad day". So we are all empathetic towards each other in terms of our situation.

It's been an environment that has been non-judgemental and one of the few places where I have openly talked about being divorced, kids being abroad, having a partner and no one has even blinked even once or judged. These small, small acts actually make a big difference and gives me a sense of belonging.
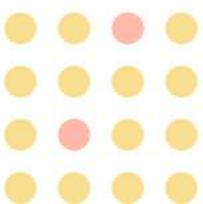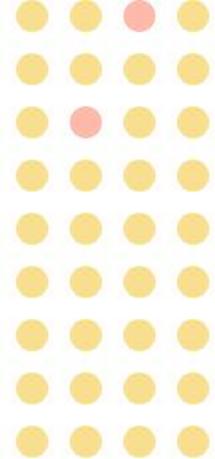
I was attending a sales kick off meeting at a company I was working in 2011. I had just moved over to sales from product engineering the year before and I was one of the senior women in the sales org. It was that time of the year when all the sales people were talking about their achievements in every meeting and I was listening to them quietly and politely, firmly believing my work would do its own talking.

After a few meetings our Senior Vice President came up to me and said "Why aren't you asking any questions?". I responded I was letting others get a chance. What he said to me at that time, was one of the most important acts of inclusion in my mind – one that changed the way I saw my own role as a woman leader. He said – "you are here not just as somebody who has great accomplishments. You are here also because you are a role model to all those other younger women starting out in sales. Your sitting quietly is giving them the wrong impression that they should not be speaking up either".

I didn't quite understand the impact of his comment at that time, but in the next session I went and sat in the front row, asked questions and provided my point of view. Right after that session I had 3 of our young hires come up to me and say we were so impressed. I realised then that sometimes I have to speak up and I have to be seen because you don't know who might get motivated at what time. I am very grateful to him for asking me to come and sit in the front and ask questions because that allowed me to not only influence people but also motivated me to start some of the Diversity and Inclusion initiatives I led in the coming years.

When I moved to the new company 5 years ago, I had been head-hunted by them. My manager, as head of the business unit, always told me that the reason I was brought in was due to my completely different experience, and hence diversity of perspectives.

The team, on the face of it, was not diverse – all men of British ethnicity. This permission to stay true to myself and not focus on changing to fit in helped me manage many difficult interactions with confidence and calm.

I was working with this organization as a learning and development lead and there were 5 projects that I was working on. Now there was another project which I was interested in but obviously my hands were full so I couldn't have become a part of it. But my heart always wanted to contribute to that as well and my manager understood that I was really eager to make some contributions there.

So in the initial stage of the strategy of that program she included me as a part of the team for contributing my ideas and helping the core project management team in setting the foundation for that initiative. I felt included then because though my hands were already full, still my expertise and my inclination towards contributing was considered. And I was invited to make those contributions and that made me feel valued.

Thank you all for your stories

In case we've missed your name, a thousand apologies – please write to **sunitha@navgati.in** and we'll rectify it and send you a cute cat meme to make up.

Aamna Khan
Aiden Luo
Amita Bothra
Ammu Rajendran
Amruta Vijayan
Anita Nair
Anitha Nadig
Anjana Chiramel
Anjana K.R.
Anusha Mandavilli
Anusha Raghunandan
Dr Archana Gupta
Arunima Sinha
Ashwini Mrinal Bhagat
B Kaushick
Bhumika Sahani
Dr Chinta Sidharthan
Christina George
Deepa Deo
Deepika Mahidhara
Falguni Thakkar
Hema Gopalarathnam
Ipsita Pal
Jayasree Ramani
Jyotika Bisht
Karubaki Preetisikta
Karvi
Karvi Ojha
Krithika Subramani
Kulshum Azmi

Lalana Zaveri
Lidiya Prasad
Lindo Cherian
Madhu Shukla
Medhika Sood
Meenakshi Shivram
Meenakshy Pillai
Meghna Kishore
Monica Pillai
Namrata Pai
Namrata Sharma
Neethu Sam
Niharika Agrawal
Nimisha Bajaj
Niyathi Madasu
Noreen Tung
Pavithra Vishwanathan
Piyush Dixit
Poly Sundaram
Poonam Gupta
Preksha
Priya Mary Mathew
Purva Pandit
Ragini Sinha
Raji Baskaran
Ramya Gowrisankar
Ranjani Santhanam
Rashmi R
Rasna Saini
Richa Wahi

Rupinder Saini
Sangeetha Rao
Sanjukta Chaudhuri
Saumita Das
Scherezade Bahmani
Sharanya Ranga
Shilpa Balagopalan
Shiwani Gurwara
Shwetal Shubhadeep
Smita Menon
Sneha Rao
Soumita Maulik
Sujatha Sriram
Suma Chandramouli
Surabhi Negi
Sweta Pachlangiya
Taab Siddiqi
Uma Chid
Varsha Adusumilli
Vasantha Erraguntla
Veena B.M
Vimala M V
Vrinda Menon

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