I’m an hour early for my meeting with Sudha Murthy—all the more time to read about her accomplishments in engineering, teaching, writing and philanthropy in a coffee shop around the corner from the Infosys Foundation office in Bengaluru. When we finally meet at ten, she says I should have just come in earlier because she’s usually in her office by 6am—seven days of the week. “I work everyday, but every day is a holiday for me because I enjoy my work,” she says with a broad smile.

I’m in for more surprises as I inquire about her staff. I’d supposed that an organisation that doles out crores in grants every year—this year it was a staggering 246 crore—would have at least 40 employees. It has two, and this includes 64-year-old Murthy, its founder and chairman. She personally greenlights every request and travels for about 15 days a month to meet with beneficiaries in the rural hinterlands of Karnataka and the six other states in which the foundation’s parent company, Infosys, has a presence.

Murthy is an everything-she-touches-turns-to-gold sort of person one has the privilege to meet a few times in a lifetime. She was the only female student at her engineering college in Hubli. Her male classmates weren’t derisive but they certainly didn’t conceal their amusement at having a girl in their carpentry workshop. “I never missed a single class because I knew if I did no one would help me. It made me self-sufficient. It also made me talk to boys on equal terms,” she shares. She is known for her feisty letter to JRD Tata in reaction to a TELCO (now Tata Motors) job notice inviting applications for trainee engineers, where women were asked not to apply. She was subsequently hired as their first female engineer. It was here that she met her future husband, Narayan Murthy, one of the co-founders of Infosys. She personally greenlights every request and travels for about 15 days a month to meet with beneficiaries in the rural hinterlands of Karnataka and the six other states in which the foundation’s parent company, Infosys, has a presence.

She’s usually in her office by 6am—seven days of the week. “I work everyday, but every day is a holiday for me because I enjoy my work,” says Murty.

While it might be difficult to touch Murty’s levels of altruism, here are her guidelines on how to be a better giver.
START WITH THE KNOWN
“I come from a middle-class fam-
ily—my mother was a school teacher, my father was a professor—but we
practised charity at home. The scope
of the foundation’s work was entirely
different. Our budget in the first year
was 16 lakh... I was not used to big
money. The way I went about it was
to start with what was familiar. We
started a library project. A simple mis-
sion: every government school should
have a library, and up to this day we’ve
built 60,000 libraries. Ninety-nine
per cent of these are in Karna-
taka so I could personally check on
the progress. This way, I had a solid
model to scale up.”

CHANGE YOUR DEFINITION OF GIVING
Donating 100 crore isn’t more valua-
ble than teaching 100 children, be-
lieves Murty. She illustrates with the
story of a woman she met recently:
“Vaishali is a housewife from Latur
and the empty hours at home were
gnawing at her. She created a module
and the empty hours at home were
hops on a scooter to teach pro bono.

DON’T STOP HAVING FUN
Murty’s ringtone is ‘Tujhe dekha toh
yeh jaana sanam’ from Dilwale Dul-
banias Lajwanti. Apart from having
authored over 24 books, she is an ac-
dent movie buff, who, during her days
at TELCO in Pune, had accepted (and
won) a challenge to watch a movie a
day for 365 days! Last year, she even
made her acting debut in a Marathi
film called Pitruravun, which is based
on her Kannada novel Rhus. She
cherishes the experience. “If I wasn’t
an engineer, I would have been a film
journalist,” she says. In keeping with
her no-purchases policy, film DVDs
are one of the few things she buys.
“I watch a movie I like thrice. When
Rajesh Khanna died, I cried so much,
my husband was confused,” she says.
“Being a do-gooder doesn’t mean you
have to deny yourself your hobbies
and passions. Live your life as you
have to deny yourself your hobbies
and passions. Live your life as you

EXCEPT NOTHING IN RETURN
“Never expect gratitude from the
receiver you might be disappointed and
demotivated,” says Murty. “When I
started off, I used to get upset. I be-
lieved that if you help someone, the
person should have gratitude. Over a
period of time, I learnt that this was
true for me and my culture, not neces-
sarily the people I was in contact with.”

PLAN THE EXIT STRATEGY
“Whenever you take on a project,
there should be an exit policy. You
cannot help people forever. You can
help for three or five years, depending
on what you want to achieve but then
you need to stop; it could be a taper
stop or it could be a sudden stop. In no
way should people who receive money
become dependent on you.”

REJECT FATIGUE
“About two centuries ago, philoso-
phers stopped asking the big ques-
tions—like, ‘What is a good life?’ A lot
of people running the world became
disconnected from a spiritual founda-
tion. Because they rejected organised
religion, they rejected a larger perspec-
tive on life. For me, that explains why
this collective delusion around over-
working prevailed. We were left alone
and defined the good life as success and
defined success as money and power.
Money and power are two legs of the
stock, but there’s a problem when you
try to also make them the third leg.”
**THE MULTITASKING MYTH**

“Scientific evidence is now incontrovertible that multitasking doesn’t exist—it’s just another illusion about how we can be more ‘productive’.

When you try to listen to a lecture and attempt to type out an email at the same time, you’re going to be task-switching. And it’s the most stressful thing you can do to your brain.”

**MARK YOUR TERRITORY**

“We’re living in a time of big corporate transition: you have employers who recognise that when they take care of their employees’ well-being, they are also doing the best for their bottom line.

Yet you also have employers who maintain barbaric practices and expect their employees to be ‘on’ all the time.

If you’re at a company that’s still living in the dark ages, you have to reevaluate how you’re using your discretion- ary time. Alternatively, you can set boundaries in a way that is not disrespectful.

I have a friend’s daughter who is working at an investment bank that expects her to be plugged in round the clock. At the end of every week, she makes it clear that she’s not going to be accessible over email but always leaves her cell number. The other day, her boss singled her out as a leader.

Because not only is she doing a great job, she also stands up for what works for her.

I think we’re going to see more and more of that.”

**THERE IS TRUTH IN TRADITION**

“My 14th book, Thrive, comes out in 25 languages because stress is a global epidemic.

In certain countries, like India and Japan, you have young people wanting to emulate the West to be successful but you also have these incredible traditions that are being lost.

I met many women, across class and culture, who were being abused. It was then that I thought Thrive in South Korea—it’s one of the most stressed-out countries in the world, with 40 people a day committing suicide—a lot of people I spoke with would tell me they were meditating, but they weren’t speaking publicly about it. A lot of these deep-rooted tradi- tions can be practised in the open and we won’t lose them. We just need to bring them back out from modern life. It’s why I love the Bhagavad Gita: its teachings are just as true now as they were then.

Dharma is an incredible concept—life isn’t just about chilling under the mango tree, it’s about being on this vertical journey.

Knowing that you’re living your dharma, or life’s purpose, means that you can deal with obsta- 
cles and challenges and you’re much more resilient as a result.

As you do so because you know you’re still on course.”

**RECHARGE TO RENEW**

“Leaning in (à la Sheryl Sandberg) and leaning back don’t have to be mutually exclu- sive ideas. If you’re only leaning in, you’re going to fall over, either literally, as I did, or metaphorically, in terms of not operating at your best.

Seven years ago, I was really uncomfortable about how de- pleted I was and being ex- hausted had become my new normal. I was too tongue- tied to know what was wrong with the state of my iPhone—if it was below 10 percent, I’d be rushing to find a charging shrine. When I collapsed, I was probably below zero per cent.

Even cats stretch back to jump higher! At the Huffington Post offices, we have nap rooms, yoga, meditation and breathing classes and healthy, free snacks. Until governments begin to invest resources to investigate the im- pact that burnout has on prosperity, we have to start at the individual and corporate levels.”—Aarti Virani

**I PLEDGE...**

“As a mother of two daughters, now 23 and 25, I do whatever I can to help orga- nizations that help women. That’s why I support Ignite Good’s mission of inspiring young women like Molly Hayward to lead lives of service. While travelling the world, Molly was shocked to learn how men lack access to sanitary pads and face health problems and humiliation as a result.

So she founded Cora, a compa- ny that brings locally-made sanitary pads to women in India, not only help- ing those women but creating local jobs for women, too.

I catch her between a conference on gen- der equality and an appearance on Times Now’s prime-time show. She spends all her weekends in office. As a

human rights lawyer and women’s rights activist who often provides free legal aid, Vinda Grover is tireless in her battle. From fighting for justice in landmark cases, like that of Sơni Sori (the Adivasi teacher-turned-political leader who was accused of being a Maoist conduit) and the gangrape surv- 

ivors from Muzaffarnagar to contrib- uting to the drafting of laws, including the Criminal Law Amendment Act 2013, against sexual assault—Grover is one of the most uncompromising and powerful voices for the empower- 
ment of women in India. She is also an active member of the UN Women In-

dia Civil Society Advisory Group and was named one of TIME’s 100 most influential people in the world in 2013. For Grover, it began in the 1980s, when she was a student of history at St. Stephen’s College in Delhi. A ‘tradi-

tion’ existed back then, of rating the female student population according to their physical attributes; the final 


calibration was summed up into a top 10 ‘chick chart’ and pinned on the official noticeboard. A bunch of them 

decided to protest this deeply misogyn- 

ist ritual. They were told they were breaking ‘family tradition’ and even threatened with expulsion. But they refused to back down. Ulti- mately, the institution banned the offensive pet chart; Grover realised that fighting for her rights was a way of life for her.

She spent her childhood in three pal-

lars of Indian law that can help women fight the various kinds of violence they face from economic to sexual. “The law isn’t the deterrent; it’s our society and institutional structures that bear down on women that are the real deterrent,” she says.

**THE ONE LAW EVERY WOMAN MUST KNOW**

“Every woman must know the Protection of Women from Domes-


tical Violence Act, 2005, a civil law that provides protection against all 

forms of violence and abuse; be it physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and/or economic. One of the rea-

sions many women are unable to es-

cape abusive or violent relation- 

ships is that they have no safe space to turn to and seek help—men is not theirs and they’re no longer welcome in their natal home.

Under DV law, not only can you seek an in-

junction against the violence, but it also recognises the woman’s right to reside in the matrimonial or shared household, whether or not you have any rights to the concerned property. Also, marital rape is not codified as a crime in India; however, under DV law, a wife can secure an order prohibit- 

ing sexual abuse by a husband. We still have a long way to go to make our laws gender just. In the meantime, this is your go-to law for protection.”

**THE RIGHT TO SAY NO!**

“Sexual assault and rape is not limited to physical brutality alone; it’s about saying, ‘I find this offensive and I do not need a Uniform Civil Code in In-

dia. I find it offensive and I do not need a Uniform Civil Code in India, but I also have some rights, too. One of the reasons women have to retain some control over our economic lives is it important to know your property rights and the laws that you are married into. Currently, differ- 

ent religions have personal laws that cover property, inheritance, divorce, etc. But the laws are riddled with problems. We do not have a con-

cept—life isn’t just about establishing the fact of a woman’s body. Acid attacks, sexual harassment, the intent to dis- 

robe a woman, voyeurism and stalking (including e-stalking) have all been in-

troduced as punishable crimes.”

**ENSURING YOUR RIGHTS AT THE WORKPLACE**

“Today, we have journalists taking on editorial assignments, and a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indicted, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indexed, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indexed, dismissals follow. But implementation is an issue; a lot of companies have policies in place and, if indexed, dismi...
I PLEDGE...
“To continue to raise my voice in support of women seeking justice, particularly where the axis of socio-political and economic power aggravates their marginalisation. I reaffirm that regardless of the rank, stature or position of the perpetrator of violence against women, I will stand in solidarity with the victim-survivors.”

FIRUZA PARIKH on THE POWER OF YOUR BODY
A healthy body is the greatest rebuttal to the patriarchal claim that women can’t have it all—work and children

“Doctors have this tendency to think they are god-complex or not, the doctor inclination began early for the gynecologist extraordinaire. Parikh is the author of the bestseller The Complete Guide To Becoming Pregnant; director, Department of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics, Ja-slok Hospital and Research Centre; Director, Reproduction and Genetics, Jasz Hospital and Research Centre; India’s leading fertility expert and gynecologist; and archetype to all the couples she’s helped conceive.

A school biology teacher pushed her towards being a doctor. It was while she was interning in the US that the first test-tube baby, Louise Brown, was born and that’s what inspired Parikh to work in the field herself. And while her international counterparts couldn’t understand why a country with a population of one billion really needed help procreating, she simplifies it: “You can’t tell a childless couple, ‘You shouldn’t have a child because your neighbour has three.’ That’s not how it works.”

You can’t tell a childless couple, “You shouldn’t have a child because your neighbour has three.” That’s not how it works” —DR FIRUZA PARIKH

KNOW THYSELF
Knowledge may not equal power but it’s definitely the first step, says Parikh. “I’ve noticed adolescents who come to me are secretive and shy. They feel sex and sexuality shouldn’t be discussed. I urge all young girls to be open and upfront.

Know your body; ask questions to the right people—doctors, experts who are non-judgmental and bound by confidentiality. Misinformation can be even more detrimental than no information.”

The next step is empowerment. “Once you understand your body, it is particularly important to protect yourself. The sexually transmitted infection human papillomavirus (HPV) is linked to cervical cancers, so it is important to take the cervical vaccine before you become sexually active.

Parenting should be open about this. In terms of lifestyles, we live in a world where toxins are everywhere—not using lower-grade plastic bottles, and avoiding metal-infused cosmetics and perfumes will go a long way in remaining fertile. Doing simple things like having a balanced diet, taking enough vitamins and exposing yourself to the sun can naturally help increase fertility.

Exercise outdoors, do things with your body—keep it moving, keep it healthy,” says Parikh.

CONTROL CONTRACEPTION
Oral contraceptives often get a bad rap (so much so that they’ve been linked with causing breast cancer) but, contrary to popular belief, Parikh says, “It’s better to prevent a pregnancy than to abort a baby and it’s essential for women to take control of their bodies—oral contraceptives are safe and excellent.”

EMBRACE YOUR CURVES
Women have a love-hate relationship with their bodies—a little unsightly belly fat can send most of us into fits of panic. But the doctor gives us a great reason to love them: they help in making babies! She says, “Fat is very important for the reproductive system; we need it to metabolise estrogen. Women should embrace their curves because that protects the reproductive system; Women who are very devoid of fat can have problems with ovulation—for course, either extreme should be avoided. Obesity causes problems as well.”

MANAGE THE CLOCK
While your ageing grandmother asking you to focus on having children, in your “childbearing years” sounds archaic, the fact remains that there is a specific time at which you’re at your most fertile. Say, “The peak reproductive age range for women is 24-34. And it’s during this age that most women are in the thick of their careers—they have social, personal and professional responsibilities. But it’s key not to get bogged down by it all and spend time focusing on yourself.

Sleep well, eat healthy and if you’re trying but not conceiving, don’t waste time on home remedies; consult a specialist who can put you on the right track. And remember, just like greying hair, a reduction in eggs is a byproduct of ageing—not a myth. So if you’re too busy to have a child within these years, freeze your eggs before you’re 36.”

CRACK A SMILE
It’s not hippie wisdom—Parikh says positivity has scientific results. “When a person’s mental frame is positive, they produce more eggs. There’s a scientific explanation for it—when one is in a positive frame of mind, or stressed, our body releases stress hormones, like predelin or cortisol, and help to keep a negative impact on the reproductive cycle; they may bring down the number of eggs.”

—Chandni Singh

I PLEDGE...
“To increase the reach of fertility services to those who cannot afford it. Over the past 10 years we have treated more than 5,000 economically disadvantaged couples in Kashmir, and at Jaszolk we do our best to subsidise treatment for those who cannot afford it. Sometimes, our wealthy patients pay for those who cannot afford it. Indian women have a high tolerance for pain—their desire for a child trumps everything. I will continue working towards making fertility treatments accessible to the underprivileged.”

EVE ENSLER on THE POWER OF YOUR SEXUALITY
Knowing yourself as a sexual being goes a long way in asserting your womanhood

“I’ve always loved the expression ‘turn your poison into medicine,’” playwright and activist Eve Ensler confides to me over a cheese omelette at a bar in Mallorca, a tropical island off the coast of Spain, where she is holding court. “Because if you look within, at the things you have really grown? Surviving sexual abuse by my father, surviving cancer. It’s the place of ‘hardest conflict where you grow the most, where you come to find yourself, find your muscles and your strength.”

Energetic and youthful at the age of 61, Enser’s body of work embodies this philosophy. The best-selling play The Vagina Monologues to her most recent book, In The Body Of The World, Ensler transforms her personal tragedies into folder for art, exploring feminist topics that make societies squirm—from describing their relationship with their vaginas, to rape and sexual violence.

She isn’t satisfied with simply making good art, however. Out of The Vagina Monologues came V-Day, a global social movement that draws on performing and theatre to end violence against women and girls. In 2012, V-Day evolved into One Billion Rising (One Billion Rising.org), in which survivors of sexual violence gathered in front of courthouses, police stations, schools and places of worship in 207 countries around the world to dance in a show of collective strength.

One Billion Rising has taken India by storm, as women’s groups in Mumbai, Chennai, Dharmsalaa, Kolkata and other cities have banded together to create a way for victims of sexual abuse to release their trauma. Groups also conducted workshops training rickshaw drivers on the issue of sexual violence.

Now more than one lakh rickshaw drivers across India have the sticker ‘My religion is respecting women’ displayed on the back of their vehicles. Enser has been inspired to look at her perspective on improving our relationships with our bodies.

In India, sexual violence is a very big issue right now. As someone who has exposed sexual violence yourself, what advice do you have for women who have been abused?”

My experience of travelling the world is that the percentages are the same—it’s just that there are a billion people in—
India. I’ve spent a lot of time in the US, Africa and Europe, and I have yet to come to a place where the statistics are not astronomical.

One of the things that happens for most of us who have been abused, either early on or at different points of our lives, is a kind of sequester of shame. You are unable to talk about it, you are unable to admit it to yourself. And that isolation is really where a lot of self-harm is created. So many cultures shame the victim. It’s always about what you could have done rather than holding men responsible for what they’re doing. One of the things that happened was after that nine-hour surgery and I was [in my] body. And, as horrible as the experience was, it was like ‘Wow! I’m back!’ I’m in this body!”

What are some practical strategies that women can use to get back into their bodies?

The best way is to get involved with social justice action. I look at all the women around the world who get involved in One Billion Rising. Organising for it, coming together for it, got so many women into their bodies. Then, on an individual level, yoga helps. Walking around naked helps. Swimming in the ocean helps. I think masturbation helps. Knowing what turns you on helps.

A lot of societies shame women who are sexual and, as a result, many women don’t feel that it’s okay for them to be sexual beings. How can women reclaim their sexual agency?

I think you should get really great books. Get Anais Nin, get tantric books, get books that really talk about sexual pleasure. And the other thing to consider is, if sexuality is so bad, then why do we have a clitoris? It’s an organ in the body that is purely for sexual pleasure. It doesn’t make sense. One thing I’ve noticed is that women have been forced to study how their bodies, instead of them being a part of their life, where we don’t scare people with it, and we don’t talk about it inappropriately, so that people grow up with a healthy understanding of sexuality. You know, in Holland, which is one of the only places that has early sexual education, they have the lowest rate of sexual violence in the world? I think that is the reason. We teach biology. We teach literature. Why aren’t we also teaching sexuality?—Malika Pulkler

I PLEDGE...

“I am incredibly proud to support AIDMAM (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch), which is working to demand justice for Dalit women survivors of violence across six states of Northern India. The Dalit Mahila Swabhiman Yatra tackled the caste system head-on with a multi-state tour led by hundreds of Dalit women that identified women leaders in their communities, sought accountability of state officials, and provided legal awareness and support to Dalit communities. As my friend Aasha Kowtal, lead organiser for AIDMAM, says, ‘Dalit women are not flowers, we are the flames of resistance.’

“When you are sexual, you are free. And society doesn’t want women to be free; that’s the most dangerous thing in the world to patriarchy—for women to be running around enjoying their sexuality”—EVE ENSLER