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Time to write new rule book on gender

On the occasion of the Girl Child Day on October 11, a forum theatre and discussion on gender issues was organised for the youth of Kerala and adjoining villages and colonies by the Navjyoti India Foundation (whose director is Neetu Sharma). Writes Kiran Bedi.

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Updated: Oct 12, 2014 20:59 IST



Kiran Bedi and Neetu Sharma
None

On the occasion of the Girl Child Day on October 11, a forum theatre and discussion on gender issues was organised for the youth of Kerala and adjoining villages and colonies by the Navjyoti India Foundation (whose director is Neetu Sharma).

The moment it was told to the youth coming to the Navjyoti Community College that a forum theatre is being organised which they have to attend, a mixed reaction was seen in the group.

Some looked totally disinterested, while others had a very sarcastic look. However, very interestingly, girls and women looked very interested.

Here is a first-hand account of what happened in an hour's time of the session.

Scene 1: A placard depicting signage: 'Caution: Men at Work', behind which a scene of a construction site was displayed where women labourers were shown working hard and a man sleeping next to the site.

Reaction of the group: All the boys had a smile on their face while girls some sort of anger.

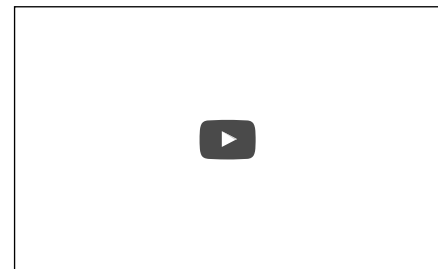
A discussion followed. The anchor asked them what they saw.

The answers that came:

A boy remarked: "This is normal."

A girl immediately countered "But this is not fair."

Another boy: "Yes, this is wrong, men should also help."



No one could remark on the terminology that was used on the signage... They thought it's alright to use the word 'Men' there even if there are also women involved because mostly men are found working at these sites.

Scene 2: Twins -- a boy and a girl are born in a family. The girl is given a pink diaper, a floral print frock, a doll to play, while the boy is given a blue diaper, shirt with check print, a car and a gun to play. As the children start growing, girls are given tags such as: a girl should be cultured, speak less, learn to take care of the family, bear children, soft spoken etc etc. The boy is socialised by giving tags such as: boys should be self-dependent, strong, aggressive, earn money, men are responsible for carrying forward the family's name (vansh) etc etc.

The session was then opened for discussion. Boys were asked to remove tags which they felt were inappropriate in girls and the latter were asked to remove inappropriate tags from boys.

It was good to see that the group felt that all the qualities written about girls should also be displayed by boys, while the girls felt that all the qualities depicted about boys were inappropriate.

However, both groups felt that boys are responsible for carrying forward the family ("ladka hi vansh chalata hai").

Scene 3: At a tea and egg stall at 11 pm, a girl comes for having egg, bread and tea, while three boys standing in the same stall start staring at her in disbelief and she starts shivering.

The discussion that followed:

The group was asked why this happens and how such a situation can be changed.

Some replies that came:

The tea stall owner should discourage boys and take a stand.

The girl should confront them for staring.

Boys should mind their own business.

After a very interesting and captivating discussion, it was concluded that such a situation happens because it is not normal to see many girls at night. However, when more girls start coming on roads and feel comfortable, it would be alright.

A boy gave an example that as a boy feels uncomfortable in a girls' school and a girl would never dare to enter a boys' school, similarly because mostly boys are on the roads at night, so even when few girls are seen, they are not looked at with a lot of respect.

The discussion was concluded and now it was the turn of the head to share some important points, which still remained unresolved:

Project head to the group: "How do these stereotypes -- pink for girls, soft-spoken attitude, family responsibility for girls, and independent, strong aggressive nature for boys are founded in society?"

Group: "Mam, this has been happening since ages and we follow what our parents teach us."

Project head: "Do these gender stereotypes have any implication on our attitude towards boys and girls?"

Group: "We don't know."

A boy: "Yes mam, because men are tough physically, that's why they are expected to protect girls."

Another boy: "Girls look up to boys for help... even if they want to lift something heavy, they ask their brothers and fathers."

Girls remained quiet all this while.

Project head: "Does this mean that girls cannot protect themselves?"

Immediately, the girls reacted, "No, mam."

The boys started laughing.

Project head: "Can this mean t

hat we don't give our girls opportunity to become strong and that's why they behave like this?"

All girls and boys agreed.

Project head: "Who decides these rules for men and women and whether they are apt?"

Group: "We don't know... They have been there since ages."

Project head: "Why do you feel that boys are responsible for carrying forward the family name ('vansh')?"

A boy: "Mam, I would give you an example. In a family with only a girl and no brother, when she gets married and goes to her husband's house, her name changes and no one is left at her father's name to carry forward family name ('vansh')."

Project head: "Alright, tell me what is the name of Maharani Laxmi Bai's husband?"

Group: (giggles) "We don't know."

Project head: "May be it's a very old story, ok tell me the name of Indira Gandhi husband?"

Again the same response: The group didn't know.

Project head: "Forget it. Let me ask you about someone, you all know very well. Tell me the name of Dr Kiran Bedi's husband and Aishwarya Rai's brother. After all they are carrying forward the family name."

Group: "Mam, we don't know."


Project head: "So, in all the above cases of four women cited, their families, both paternal and marital sides, are not known by their husbands or brothers but by them and will always be known ever by these women. So what is important: Being a boy or being a role model?"

The group now had clarity on this.

Lastly, a boy asked, "Mam, how do we change this?"

Project head: "Very simple... It's time to write our new rule book on gender by the youth. And how do we know what rules to set. Yet simpler. Just think, whether the rule we are setting is taking our society on a progressive path or holding it back.

kiranbedi2005@yahoo.co.in (mailto:kiranbedi2005@yahoo.co.in)

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