



Panel Discussion on Identifying Gender Bias in the Classroom

at ISME, Mumbai on 12th April, 2019

The None in Three (Ni3) Research Centre in India led its series of talks with a panel discussion on “Identifying Gender Bias in Classrooms”. Experts from the education sector came together at ISME Mumbai, to share their cognizance and experiences about the crucial and sensitive matter of gender bias in classrooms that can enable gender-based violence (GBV).

Mr. Bhanu Varma, the Country Co-director of Ni3, commenced the event with a succinct introduction of the history and establishment of the centre. He proceeded to introduce the distinguished panellists for the day – Mr Jagdish Indalkar, Principal of KVK Ghatkopar Sarvajanic School (a government aided school in a lower income area), Ms Sunita George, Principal of Bombay Scottish School, Powai, (a private school in an upper middle class area), Ms Jerin Anne Jacob, COO of One Future Collective, (an organisation working towards building compassionate youth social leadership) Ms Bharghavi Deshpande, Director for Student Experience at ISDI, and moderator Prarthana Patil, Country Co-director of Ni3 and Program Head First Year Studies at ISDI.

Ms. Patil began with a brief introduction on how the schools and educational spaces unconsciously introduce gender bias in teaching methodologies and in the curriculum. The objective of the discussion was to get an insight on how to begin identifying and



eventually tackling gender bias present in classrooms. Mr. Indalkar took forward the conversation by sharing some incidences which emphasized the role of teachers in dealing with issues like child sexual abuse or violence faced by the students. He was clear that as educators one should be sensitive and judicious in their help, and also create a comfortable environment where students are encouraged to come forth and talk freely.

Following this, Ms. George elaborated on how gender bias is present in students’ lives from a very early age. She explained how the present education system exposes students to gender bias right from the pre schooling stage, both at home and in school. Even nursery rhymes and the fairy tales create a stereotype – the ideal girl being naïve, delicate and subdued, while waiting for a prince to be the knight in shining armour, while an ambitious woman is portrayed to be wicked.

She presented examples of textbooks that show inherent bias, like, in Mathematics the chapter on profit and loss of a 9th grader features male names only, Social Studies books describe the functions of a Mayor or an authoritative entity by using the ‘he’ pronouns, books of a pre -schooler features male gender while explaining ‘wrong behaviour’ etc. With other instances Ms. George brought light to the nuanced messages that percolate to the students that in turn puts them under an immense pressure to ‘fit in’ to the ‘ideal’ and forces them to view the opposite gender in either a superior or demeaning manner. This process eventually reflects in life choices and behaviour that can encourage gender-based violence.





Ms. Deshpande spoke about observing a faint background of gender bias during her interaction with students; she shared her experience of managing events that are held at ISDI with the help of students. She explained her experience of gender bias by citing that the physical and technical responsibilities get assigned to boys, while creative responsibilities are given to girls. The society has set the bar of capabilities and expectations for boys and girls separately and unconsciously we as educators have accepted them. Ms. Patil added that the expectations of gender roles at present needs change. Our acts are heavily influenced by society's beliefs and largely by our own standards based on what is ideal.

Continuing the discussion, Ms. Jacob shared one of the gender sensitisation activities she performs at various schools. In this interesting activity, she performs a privilege walk where the girls and boys are made to stand in different groups and certain statements are read. If these statements apply to the students, they walk ahead and the rest stay behind. The statements usually aim to make the students realise about their biases, which is eventually discussed. She also explained that when gender bias can lead to GBV, the conversation around consent is of utmost importance, giving the example of a boy pulling at a girl's pigtail and persisting even after her refusal. Young girls end up believing that it is acceptable for a man to not take notice of her refusal, and for the boys the refusal is of no value. In future this leads to sexual abuse, marital rape, and other forms of GBV. Educators need to give importance to consent and find a way of including it in classroom discussions to help create a transformative and informative space.

Another aspect of gender bias outlined by Ms. Jacob was the double-standards it deploys and how both genders are affected by it. Boys who are feminine are bullied and teased in classes, which deeply affects

their personality development and. She explained the way to dismantle privilege and make students aware is by 'pulling in' to a conversation that can resolve the matter, instead of punishment. Ms. Patil took forward the discussion by questioning the very nature of what we understand as GBV in classroom spaces. While generally GBV is understood as physical or sexual, we tend to ignore the social, economic and spatial violence that arises because of gender bias.

Once the panellists shared their experiences, the discussion was opened to the audience. Meenal, faculty at ISDI, explained her experience of personally knowing people who have spent years being confused, because of the sole reason of not fitting in to their prescribed gender's stereotype. Specifically for men, society makes it very difficult for them to express their feelings. Agreeing with this Ms. George added that since many of us have perceived the male gender to be superior, young girls take pride in calling themselves manly or tomboyish, whereas men of the society have to face bullying if they don't prescribe to their gender roles.

Ms. Deshpande cited how Indian parenting should also be questioned. Parents themselves need to be aware about gender bias and GBV. Generally, parents pick up gender specific toys, they label daughters as tomboys if they pick up cycling as an interest, etc. But parents, she said, need to accept the fact that it is fine for girls to cycle while being beautiful and feminine. Continuing this discussion, Mr Indalkar gave an example of his school where he tries to include both boys and girls in all the activities, whether rangoli making or band parade. He carefully explained the new framework of the Maharashtra government's curriculum that tries to make books gender sensitive. Appreciating the efforts of the government Ms. Patil clarified the ultimate goal of Ni3 – to develop a prosocial game for schools to be included in their curriculum.



Towards the end, many audience members shared their experiences about dealing with gender bias in educational spaces both successfully and otherwise. A conclusion that was drawn is that awareness needs to reach the staffrooms of the schools before the classrooms. One compelling question was whether same-gender schools saw less violence on gender non-conforming students than other mix-gender schools. Ms. George felt that same-gender schools cease engagement with the opposite gender and that is why many such schools are becoming mix-gendered. She further elucidated that the kind of bullying happening in same-gender and mix-gender schools might be different, but the problem of violence would still exist. Even though historically in India it was same-gender schooling that helped young girls stay in schools, at present the practicality of this is limiting.

Our panel discussion confirmed the elusive presence of gender bias in schools and other educational spaces, and in the conduct of educators too can facilitate situations of GBV. Although several initiatives of educators and policy level changes are apparent and can help reduce the effect of the same. The panellists showed change is possible only if awareness around such issues is increased, and individuals take responsibility for disseminating information as well as empathy.