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Class of Dear Boys discussed #MeToo issues

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KOLKATA: A gender sensitization campaign in school classrooms across the city has gained added relevance in the wake of the high-decibel #MeToo campaign in social media worldwide. The #MeToo campaign that was initiated by Hollywood actor Alyssa Milano after the scandal of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein came out in the open and saw millions of women worldwide, including Kolkata, join in to relate personal experiences of sexual abuse, has led to women's rights organisations calling for a societal change beginning with the upbringing of children. That is what Dear Boys, a campaign in the form of school workshops, set out to do at least a couple of months ago.

Designed and conducted by author Swati Sengupta, the Kolkata

Police campaign comprises workshops aimed at sensitizing boys by talking to them about their roles and responsibilities as boys who are going to be men tomorrow. Till date, workshops have been held in 10 schools.

The classroom interactions on gender issues are devised in an off-the-cuff, fun manner that often lead to long, animated discussions and disagreements, revealing diverse opinions, concerns, fears and doubts. "Several issues crop up during discussions. For instance, what should be their role on social media; why we should not judge people on the basis of clothes they wear or the time of day they leave or return home," said Sengupta, who expects the #MeToo campaign to figure in the next round of workshops in 10 more schools after the festive break.

She says boys are quite open to altering their ideas and opinions about something so long as it is logically explained. Children also know a lot more than they disclose to adults. "At one of the sessions, a boy remarked: 'We understand whatever you are telling us, but will our parents do so? Isn't it necessary to tell our parents exactly

what you are telling us?' It reveals the child's reflection on his parents' perception and behaviour," pointed out Sengupta, whose novel 'Half the Field is Mine' deals with gender issues among children.

Saswati Ghosh, director of Maitree — a network of women's organisations, NGOs and individual women — lauds the initiative and feels it dovetails perfectly with the issues that #MeToo campaign. "Parents sow seeds of gender inequality when they tell a boy to be ashamed if a girl scores higher marks. It is important to speak to boys and not just girls about gender and security. Boys, I believe, are jealous that girls get all the attention. This insecurity needs to be addressed. If the workshops are able to ignite the thought among them that girls are equal to boys and deserve equal respect, then it would have achieved a lot," she said.

Kolkata Police additional commissioner Supratim Sarkar hopes the campaign will ensure these boys on the threshold of adulthood don't pass lewd comments at women or molest when they grow up. "We as a force have always thought about protecting the victim. Through this campaign, we are trying to tackle the problem at its root by sensitizing potential oppressors at an impressionable age. The idea is to fight the crime, not the gender," he added.