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Oh Boy, It's a Girl!

Saying boys will be boys and cracking the whip of dos and don'ts on girls has seldom worked. Swati Sengupta writes about her experience of partnering on a project that takes the direct approach on gender initiation

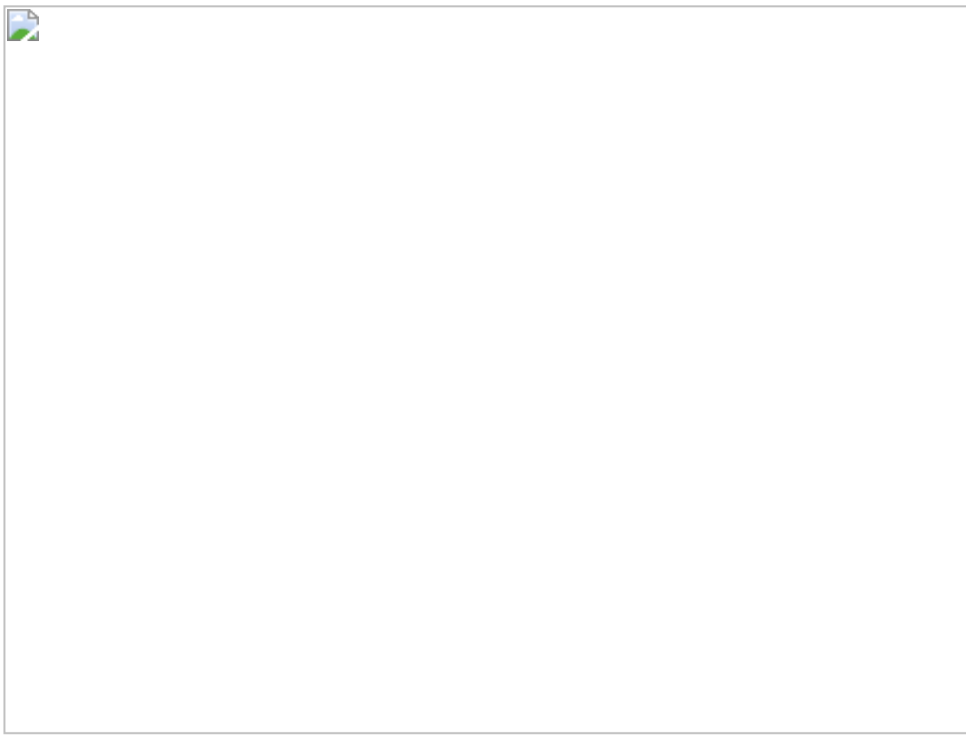


Swati Sengupta | Published 05.11.17, 12:00 AM

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Sengupta sensitising schoolboys

In an audio-visual room, some school students - from classes IX to XII - are scribbling on a blackboard the "qualities" or "characteristics" associated with "girls" and "boys" in two separate columns. There is supposed to be no line separating the columns. I am hoping at least one of them will point out, protest and tell me that girls and boys are meant to have exactly the same qualities or characteristics.

Those among them who appear to hate the exercise, do so because they think they are too grown-up for such childish things. They scrawl on the board - shy, long hair, confident, mature, tolerant, pretty, sweet under the "girls" column, and confident, beard, short hair, macho, handsome, strong, successful under the "boys" column. It is embedded in their minds that women and men are supposed to be different.

This exercise is part of the Kolkata Police's "Dear Boys" project. At the root of it is this need to discuss frankly with children sexual harassment, violence against women and, in particular, the role of boys in creating a world where women and men are treated as equals.

We are always imposing strictures on little girls - asking them not to play football in shorts, avoid certain roads, warning them of dangers lurking here and there, teaching them how to protect themselves. But we hardly ever tell our boys how they should conduct themselves, that they should not tease women, should not judge women by the clothes they wear, and so on. There is an urgent need to do so and it must start early.

"Dear Boys" sessions include girls as well, so it is never a one-sided story.

So what exactly is happening in these sessions? Among other things, I am talking to them about concepts in Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Robert J. Stoller's *Sex and Gender*. Stoller was a leading psychoanalytic theorist on sex-identity, and talked about a "core gender identity". Millett is author of the seminal book in which she analysed patriarchal power and socially constructed notions of power and domination. You've got to refer to Millett to bust certain myths around stereotyping.

Stoller's concept that "core gender identity" is established by the age of 18 months, is quoted by Millett in her book. She also repeats what Stoller says about gender identity - that it is a primary human identity. Millett also talks about family being patriarchy's chief institution, how "male" is associated with "aggression" and "female" with "passivity", and so on.



All these concepts and notions may appear difficult for teenagers to understand. But, I think it is possible to explain to children even the most difficult of concepts if told simply.

To explain patriarchy and the family, I show them a scene from the Bollywood film, *Sarkar*, where the men are sitting around the dining table eating (there is a little boy with them; after all he is male too) while the women are serving. I show them a poster from the film *The Godfather*. It has on it an image of Marlon Brando and the words "Stop crying, be a man". There are also photographs of superheroes crying - to highlight how men are always being told to suppress their urge to cry, and coldness and cruelty being tom-tommed as manly virtues.

While discussions start with this background - in order to establish that both men and women are humans with only biological differences - we are primarily discussing the roles and responsibilities of boys in checking violence and biases against women.

Now for the children's reactions.

"I can understand what you are trying to say, but how will the family function smoothly?"

"People think feminism is against the interests of men. I think men must read up and try to understand before they attack."

"There must be a captain in every team. What's wrong if the father is the captain?"

"Before arguing that seats in public transport should not be reserved for women, boys must try to recall if they were ever harassed in a bus." This one came from a boy.

"You are saying there's nothing wrong in men crying. But what will happen to the nation if the Army starts crying?"

There it is, a range of emotions - concern, outrage, bias, fear, sexism, wonder, prejudice, pity... There are voices reflecting the prevalent culture that associates the Army with manhood and a male as the head of the family and the team captain. There are other voices that spoke about the need to change the old image.

By the end of the session, there is an almost tacit understanding among all those present that the line separating the "boys" column from the "girls" column on the blackboard is meant to be erased. Yes, it is a bit symbolic, a tad dramatic. But sometimes it works. It is, most certainly, a start.

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