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By addressing Dear Boys, the Kolkata Police are taking gender sensitisation to the right audience

An ex-journalist and the police have teamed up to teach school boys what it means to be a responsible and sensitive man.

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Courtesy: Kolkata Police

A special session was underway at one of the elite co-educational English medium schools in Kolkata. The students, all in their teens, were listening to Swati Sengupta, a former journalist, author and gender activist, talk about things that were rarely discussed – at home or in their classrooms. It was not sex education. But something more complex.

After the group had been shown clips from the film *Sarkar* and *The Godfather* and taken through posters and presentations about how patriarchy works in our society, a girl spoke up about what had been bothering her the most – menstruation. She was initially shy, but eventually found the confidence in her to talk about how it was difficult for young girls to travel without reserved seats when they are menstruating and cramping. It was heartening to see that, irrespective of their gender, her classmates supported her completely.

In another school, during a similar session helmed by Sengupta, the boys began to discuss why women who fight for equal rights should not seek reserved seats in public transport. This seems to be a major issue with young boys, who feel it is a form of reverse discrimination. It took one boy to change the discourse. In the middle of the session, he stood up and told his friends that this was unjustifiable because none of them had ever been molested in buses.

There have been similar displays of empathy, in school after school where the Dear Boys campaign, conceived and conducted by Sengupta with the enthusiastic support of the Kolkata Police, has been successful in turning the narrative on gender sensitisation on its head.



A Dear Boys session at Jagabondhu School.

Onus on boys

After its first round covering 10 schools across the city, and an outdoor and digital push supported by the Kolkata Police, the campaign is poised for its second phase, taking the debate to government schools both in the city and the fringes.

Sengupta says the Dear Boys campaign was born out of the frustration that in a country with a dismal record on sexual harassment, gender sensitisation programmes are always meant for girls. What to do or not, how to defend yourself – the onus of securing equal rights and a safer environment was invariably placed on girls.

“I’ve always felt that we need to discuss gender equality with men and it must start early – that idea was always there,” said Sengupta. “For the past three years, I have been visiting schools to discuss one of my books – *Half the Field is Mine*, a young adult novel – with teenagers. The publishers, Scholastic, had organised these book readings and discussions. *HTFIM* is a story about a mixed football team in which girls and boys play together. These sessions – in various cities all over the country – were full of animated discussions with young adults on gender equality.”

Sengupta also conduct sessions for the young on gender, which she calls “Elephant in the Room”, and it was the response to her projects that encouraged her to take the fight to the next level.

“I placed a proposal before the Kolkata Police,” she said. “I wanted government support, especially police support, because not only does it make it more visible, it also makes it more acceptable to people,

rather than a mad woman running around in schools trying to implement an idea.” The Kolkata Police, she added, showed exceptional responsiveness in embracing and supporting the idea.



Dear boys... About time we discussed this.

Who do you wish to be when you grow up? Someone who hurts and teases women? Or, a sensitive, responsible guy? What role must boys play to create a world where women and men are treated as equal? We are coming to your school from August 24 to discuss this!




Additional Commissioner of Police Supratim Sarkar explained the decision to back the campaign: “We [at Kolkata Police] had strongly felt the need to initiate such a campaign as it is extremely important to sensitise school-age boys to curb the menace of sexual harassment of women.”

Each Dear Boys session is no more than 45 minutes to an hour. But sometimes, they go on for longer because the discussions – Sengupta calls them that because instead of preaching to the adolescents, she encourages them to debate the ideas she seeds in their heads – are intense and emotionally charged.

There have been occasions when she has had to send the attending teachers away, because their presence inhibited students from discussing some of the issues that bothered them in their own families. At other times, she has had to stop the discussions because it got too exhausting for everyone.

With visuals of Chinese foot binding, film clips, presentations, and even trending topics (as in the #metoo campaign), she draws children into conversations on patriarchy, concepts of family, domination. “I tell them that people should not judge others on the basis of clothes they wear, how every culture is different, that we should not comment on what others do, should not be condescending towards women under the pretext of protecting them...”

More importantly, she discusses what it means to be a responsible and sensitive man.



Students raise questions at a Dear Boys session at Future Foundation School.

The response to the Dear Boys campaign has been inspiring – more parents, schools and children want to participate. “In fact, it has been a problem to limit the number of children to 50 for each session, because I wanted eye contact and therefore a small group. Most schools wanted more children to participate because parents don’t want their children to be left out. Some schools didn’t listen, and I did two sessions with 400 children each.”

Whether she is addressing students in a Bengali medium school or a school that follows the international baccalaureate curriculum, Sengupta says the issues, the questions and the response are almost always the same. It changes however when her attendees are a mix of girls and boys. “In co-ed schools the girls can share their own experiences, and also counter some argument given by the boys. In boys’ schools, I have to do that, not because I am a woman but because the whole idea is to be fair and equal.”

The recent #metoo campaign is likely to be a part of the discussion in the next phase of the Dear Boys campaign. “More children will understand the level of sexual harassment faced by women,” said Sengupta, who wrote the widely read, shared and discussed [Facebook status update](#) from Kolkata Police, asking women to be “very very angry”.

“I am glad the #metoo campaign happened because in subsequent sessions I will perhaps not have to read out figures showing how rampant sexual harassment against women is,” said Sengupta. “And the Kolkata Police officers agreed with me. That is exactly the support I wanted to be able to spread the idea.”

As schools in West Bengal reopen after the Diwali break, Sengupta will be preparing the schedule for the next phase, with inputs from the police department and the schools. She is aware that the one-off sessions, though impactful, may need to be sustained. The discussion ought to continue. But for now, she is happy to have initiated a discussion, seeded a thought, and encouraged an environment of empathy, trust and respect.

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