

Report on the panel discussion: “What are Little girls made of?”

“Sugar, spice and everything nice!” Is that really what little girls are made of?

The 11th of October, 2021, marked the day when a panel discussion titled, *What are Little Girls made of?* was held to commemorate the International Day of the Girl Child! This event was organized by the Sophia Centre for Women’s Studies and Development and the Department of Physical Education, Jr. College Sophia; in collaboration with St. Xavier’s Institute of Education’s Women Development Cell - Potentia. The session was presided over by Dr. Sr. Ananda Amritmahal, Principal of Sophia College, Mumbai, and Dr. Sosamma Samuel, Principal of St. Xavier’s Institute of Education, Mumbai. Among the attendees were the members of the SCWSD and Potentia, and approximately 100 other students, belonging to both the member institutions.

The spokespersons for the day were three great personalities - Prof. Medha Rajadhyaksha, Mr. Sandeep Jadhav and Sr. Noella de Souza - each accomplished in their field, belonging to different disciplines of expertise which added varied perspectives to the theme at hand, making the session more enriching than ever!

The event began with a brief introduction of SCWSD by one of the student-members, after which Dr. Vini Sebastian, faculty-in-charge of Potentia gave a brief note on Potentia, highlighting the activities and the noteworthy work done by the cell. This was followed by the opening remarks by Dr. Sossama Samuel and Dr. Sr. Ananda Amritmahal. Dr. Sosamma emphasized on the relevance of the theme in today’s world where there is so much of injustice and violence being inflicted upon little girls. Some examples of recent gruesome incidents where young girls have been recipients of inhuman violence, did not only give a gory picture of today’s reality, but also led us to introspect on the kind of world we are inheriting for our girls. Dr. Sr. Ananda then threw light on the need to change our perception if we need to bring about a considerable change in the world. In her powerful words, she mentioned how girls are persons to be cherished, and not commodities to be bargained over or objects to be used! These inspiring words set the tone for the discussion to follow.

The eminent personalities were then introduced by a student of Sophia college. The long list of achievements and areas of expertise of the panelists were truly inspiring.

The panel discussion then began with certain questions being addressed to the panelists, and they sharing their thoughts, and observations on the same. Following are some of the noteworthy take-aways from the discussion:

1. While talking about the urban and rural setting impacting the condition of girls, Madam Medha spoke about the need to create safe spaces, be it for boys or girls, in the rural as well as the urban areas. This need stems from the ongoing violence, both physical as well as emotional faced by children of all genders in today's 21st Century.
2. An important highlight of the contributions by Madam Medha was the recitation of the original as well as the alternative poem, '*What are Little Girls made of?*' The poem provided an alternative perspective to the traditional understanding of what girls and boys are capable of, and how they ought to be. It highlighted that girls and boys are both equal, and only when we change our ways of looking at their potentials, will we be able to build a better future for our children and youth (especially the girls).
3. Sr. Noella, through real-life examples of three girls, put before the attendees a picture of how inequity in education is still an indispensable part of urban India too. The stories of the girls accentuated the different reasons for the same, focusing on poverty as a major one.
4. Sir Jadhav presented a beautiful poem in Hindi which intertwined the different roles that women play, and their pitiful state in today's society. He threw light on the disappointing number of girls in tribal and rural areas who are actually privileged to receive basic education.
5. Another stirring Hindi poem by Kamla Basin titled, *Kyunki Main Ladki Hun, Muje Padna Hai'* was recited by Madam Medha, which comprised a conversation between a father and daughter, where the daughter expressed her thoughts on why she wants to receive education. This poem was indeed a stimulating one as it did not only invite the audience to reflect on the various hurdles that girls face, but also provided a solution to these problems, i.e., Education - Education not only for women, but for everyone, so that the inbuilt patriarchal mindset across the world is broken. Through this example, Madam Medha threw light on the power of literature to bring about the needed gender sensitivity, and make a difference in society. She also spoke about the importance of women to take things in hand and become self-sufficient. In addition, Madam Medha also discussed about Zentangle art as a means to meditate and express freely. Through this form of art, she called attention to different forms of art, and how they can be instrumental in spreading the necessary awareness regarding the age-old ideas of what being a girl is, and replacing it with contemporary understandings. A fine poem written by her beautifully elucidated the point she was trying to make.
6. Sr. Noella also threw light on how her programs have successfully spread the necessary awareness and education, and brought about significant changes at the grassroot level. The inspiring feat was truly motivating, stirring in each one of us the will to do our bit to make a difference in this world. Sr. Noella also stressed on the need for the value of equality, equity

and justice to be ingrained in the social system, and this could be done by exposing children to stimulating inputs. This would not only help in fighting the evils of today, but would also go a long way in building a hope-filled future.

7. An important observation by Sir Jadhav was that while talking about the condition of girls in rural areas, the numbers are quite deceiving when it comes to understanding the actual situation at the grassroot level. In contrast to what some statistics might reveal, the actual scenario is disheartening, where girls in rural areas have to struggle to receive even basic education. The first step would be to cater to their development by bringing about some infrastructural changes, teaching them self defense so that they can travel long distance to seek education without any fear, working to reduce the violence inflicted upon young girls by collaborating with the local government bodies or the police, and working with social bodies to bring about the upliftment of girls through the spread of education - the only weapon that can empower them.

The next part of the day was equally wonderful, as it threw the stage open for students to portray their talent by expressing the theme in their own unique way. Different posters, poetry recitations, one-act plays, etc. served as a cherry on the cake, elevating the impact of the entire event.

The concluding remarks by Fr. Blaise were equally inspiring, leaving the audience with a thought to ponder upon. A thought that emphasized the need for all genders to blend together, so as to eradicate the evil of inequality from the roots.

To conclude, the panel discussion was an enriching one, which brought to stage the different concerns regarding gender inequity that are still rooted in our society. The session truly served as a vital platform to discuss a topic which is an integral part of today's society, and greatly concerns the urban as well as the rural population. It was a truly a day of significant learnings and sharings.