

A dialogue on gender-sensitization policies and programmes in institutions of higher education convened by Ebong Alap and Calcutta University Women's Studies Research Centre (CUWSRC) on May 4, 2013 at CUWSRC, 4th Floor, Alipur Campus, Kolkata 700027

Excerpts from the Report

Inaugural Session

Chair: Ratnabali Banerjee, UGC

The programme starts with Ishita Mukherjee giving an inaugural welcome address. She highlights the main issues at hand in institutions of higher education with regards to gender. She talks about the important step taken up by UGC in this regards with the setting up of a Task Force. She extends her welcome to the chair and panelists of the first session – Ratnabali Banerjee, Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Jasodhara Bagchi. She also mentions that this is probably the first such colloquium of its kind in the country, at least in the recent past.

Ratnabali Banerjee chaired the inaugural session. As the Joint Secretary of the UGC's Eastern Regional Office, she highlighted what steps are being taken by the UGC. She talks in detail about the UGC measures for ensuring gender equity in universities and colleges. She details the work of the Task Force Committee set up by UGC in view of the increasing numbers of incidents of violence against women. The Task Force Committee is not only looking into ways to ensure safety for women in these institutions but also ways of bringing about changes in perception through gender sensitization at every level in higher education. The Committee will suggest measures to bring about greater sensitivity to issues of gender. Further the Committee is also evaluating the existing infrastructures and systems in place to ensure gender equity on campuses. In order to do this the Committee has a designed a questionnaire which she herself

has been responsible for sending to over twelve-hundred universities in the eastern region. She went on to speak in some detail about the sections in the questionnaire. She adds that there is a suggestion that gender sensitivity be ensured even at the level of recruiting faculty and non-teaching staff members of higher education institutions. However, she also feels that cognitive training for gender awareness and sensitivity should start much before individuals start their undergraduate studies. And in fact, many individuals actually do not come into the ambit of higher education. Therefore, from pre-teen years focus should be given on retraining perceptions about gender. Further, she sees the role of gender sensitization in higher education as crucial because young undergraduate students can be the 'army of volunteers' to reach out to and educate the masses.

Ishita Mukherjee speaks next saying that the purpose of this dialogue is to critically look at our campuses. For instance, it has been quite a long time since certain guidelines like the Visakha Guidelines have been enacted or come into force. Yet many institutions might not still have necessary infrastructure

in place. She feels that Complaints' Committees (where they exist) must be complemented by concrete gender sensitization programme to holistically address gender inequity. Further, Complaints Committee itself functions post facto, as it were, and preventive measure, particularly through awareness raising is crucial. She points to other hazy areas that such committees can/ cannot deal with: for instance, when harassment of students take place outside the jurisdiction of the university/ college campus. She gives an example of the Rajabajar Science College where the students and faculty were joined by many participants from neighbouring institutions of higher education to effectively protest against harassment faced by girl students outside the campus. The protest forced the police to take action. She names a few other colleges where such complaints have been very effectively dealt with such as Gurudas College and Monindra Chandra College under the Calcutta University and St. Xavier's University. Ishita Mukherjee also stressed the importance of sensitizing the staff. So overall she felt an integrated policy would best answer all the needs. Each UGC ordinance should holistically connect to previous ones so that each cell/ activity/ monitoring become interlinked and organically connected. She shares some of the particular difficulties she has faced for instance in the putting up of stationary posters

according to UGC guidelines. She feels that the Women's Studies undergraduate course has facilitated discussions on gender issues with students. The next step would be starting these discussions with faculty, maybe with the help of organizations that are experienced in conducting such workshops and training such as Ebong Alap.

The next speaker Sarmistha Dutta Gupta contextualizes the thought behind organizing the present dialogue. Ebong Alap has been working consistently on gender issues among students, staff and parents particularly among those who are marginalized due to geographical location, economic conditions and lack of access to the English language. Ebong Alap workshops are designed as a reaction to contemporary situations and happenings. Therefore workshops make people relate discussions to everyday realities. She also mentions some of the books published by Ebong Alap in lucid, conversational Bangla to aid the dissemination of ideas about gender, globalization, communalism, etc. However, gender has been a main component irrespective of what the books are talking about. She details some work Ebong Alap has been doing with school students, teachers, parents and others in a remote island in the Sunderbans.

She feels the need to underscore gender issues as relevant to both boys as well as girls through appropriate modules. Her experience shows that classroom interactions, even if they are classes explicitly on gender studies, often do not give enough opportunities to the students and teachers to address everyday issues that arise from gender inequity. And this is where, she feels, an NGO like Ebong Alap has a role to play in facilitating conversations through workshops, discussions, film screenings and so on. In order to do that Ebong Alap needs to have conversations with teachers and faculty about the needs of the students, which then is why such a workshop is of paramount importance. The recent incidents of violence against women, sharply underscored the need for gender sensitization, among young people in particular. In fact, a lot of young women, she feels, are losing confidence in an environment of continued violations and inaction on part of the police and administration. In this context, specifically arising out of concerns about issues of gender equity, the UGC formed a Task Force in January. Sarmistha Dutta Gupta asserts that this is possibly the first time such a colloquium has happened since the Task Force was set up. She ends her speech with hope for a lively and fruitful discussion among all.

Jasodhara Bagchi felt that without discussions and exchanges, issues of gender will not flourish. She feels that 'complaints cell' is a misnomer and that efforts should be directed at establishing, like in Jadavpur University, counselling cells. She gave examples from advertisements that use gender stereotyping and advocated discussions to raise awareness as opposed to using censorship. She felt that Womens' Studies should not remain limited, rigid and atrophy. She saw a clear role for Ebong Alap here as it engages with evolving ideas and brings people together through discussions. She ended with a quote from Kamla Bhasin which says that the wall should be modified into a bridge to give a fitting reply.

Fourth Session: Presentation by Ebong Alap

Mukul Mukherjee starts by saying how the shared experiences of the teachers has been enriching and thought provoking. She says that problems of attitudinal change can only be addressed by addressing deep-seated prejudices. And ultimately the starting point has to be the familial sphere where such things are addressed from early stages.

Sarmistha Dutta Gupta broadly outlines the work of EA which works with students who are marginalized in terms of their location, their access to English language, their economic backgrounds and so on which also therefore makes it difficult for them to access contemporary debates on gender, globalization and communalism. EA works through workshops and in recent years they have focused exclusively on gender issues particularly pertaining to conceptual clarity on gender and sexuality. One of the focuses has been on constructions of femininity and masculinity to address the oft-asked question about the relevance of gender issues for men. Recognizing the immense importance of making gender relevant for boys and girls, the Ebong Alap team is mixed in terms of gender and it always tries to get colleges/schools to enroll a mixed group of students for the workshops.

EA prefers the format of workshops as opposed to seminars or lecture for knowledge dissemination because it does not remain limited to a fixed hierarchy between the facilitators and the participants. Another way EA facilitates discussion among participants is by showing films/clips and calling on participants to give their

reactions. For example, EA has conducted a film festival on the theme of Women's Work and Gender in a school in Sunderban where they have been working for some time. The films were *Mahanagar* (dir: Satyajit Ray), *Adalat O Ekti Meye* (Dir: Tapan Sinha) and *Ekdin Protiodin* (dir: Mrinal Sen). Ebong Alap also has powerpoints in Bangla on many related topics. Within workshops there are also group discussions – participants are divided into groups and given newspaper clipping which they then have to discuss.

Since many college teachers noted that there was a lack of engagement on the part of students with WS, she feels that Ebong Alap can play a positive role here as students might be less intimidated to open up to facilitators who are not teachers and therefore do not exercise control over them. Young people lack safe spaces to talk about their bodies and sexuality. Ebong Alap facilitators often personalize the workshops through their own life experiences which helps people to open up. However, no two workshops are alike. Everything is modified based on contextual realities including location, age of participants, etc.

The next Ebong Alap member to speak is Rangan Chakravarty. He comments on the questionnaire developed by the UGC Task Force. The questionnaire is divided into three broad sections: physical infrastructure (as with questions about adequate lighting), administrative infrastructure and gender training. The last is very important as it trains the mind, trains perceptions. Gender orientation is very important family level but also among administrative level and among the faculty of an institution of higher education. Patriarchy is not equivalent to men. It's a larger system within which there has to be, he feels, many small revolutions. In this day and age of globalization market forces have been instrumental in mainstreaming certain patriarchal values and universalizing them. Students and young people have to be equipped with teleological and conceptual tools that will better enable to critically examine these things.

Having worked in the field of development and gender, Rangan Chakravarty feels that workshops are usually designed in a 'one size fits all' format. Further, dissemination through seminars is also onesided. But Ebong Alap works through the workshop format and the workshops constantly evolve. Since the common perception is that gender is only for women, there was need to develop material for men. Male insecurity and anxiety is increasing especially around the large number

of women entering the public sphere through jobs. This male anxiety needs to be factored into any discussions on gender. One of the projects should be to create a Gender Reader in Bangla.

Mukul Mukherjee stresses the importance of taking awareness to the right places and welcomes the idea of a gender reader. She feels many students who are not English-savvy will benefit immensely from it. She then invites Ruchira Goswami to speak.

Ruchira Goswami introduces herself as a faculty of National University of Juridical Sciences as well as a member of Ebong Alap. The mixed gender nature of Ebong Alap is a source of great strength, she believes. She relates the experience of conducting a workshop on gender and sexuality with middle-aged women where one male member of Ebong Alap, Aveek Sen, was also present as a facilitator. Although they perceived that this might be a barrier, it led to very interesting and frank discussions.

One other strength of Ebong Alap, Ruchira feels is their work as a team which strategises together and comes up with modules together. The workshop approach of Ebong Alap maintains continuity. It is not like seminars where several different delinked presenters talk about different topics. Instead, Ebong Alap forges links between the sessions, between the speakers and between workshops. While the workshops are designed to be better fit contextually, they are also a learning process. So that what is learnt in a workshop with rural youngsters can then be discussed with urban students she teaches. In fact, while urban students can be more aware of certain gender issues they can also be equally at sea as their rural counterparts when it comes to certain other issues.

Where institutions are interested, it is easy to maintain a process of dialogue with Ebong Alap and for the organization to maintain continuity. It is important for Ebong Alap to get feedback from colleges. Workshops should benefit not only students but also the faculty. Therefore, this forum is a very good place to start this process of dialogues with institutions.

The next speaker, Aveek Sen, says that ideas of workshops also come from the members' experiences. For instance, in teaching *Othello* by Shakespeare to a group of students in Presidency college at a time when the city was seeing a lot of agitation over the death of Rizwanur Rahman in 2007, gave them the idea to start a series of

workshops on 'The Freedom to Choose One's Partner'. Therefore, such discussions can be started through teaching. One of the first workshops in this series was conducted in Jadavpur University by Ebong Alap where students from a number institutions, both urban and rural, had come. The workshop did see a lot of discussion by undergraduate students on freedom of choice in sexual relationships. Aweek Sen also feels that it was much easier to discuss negative aspects of sexuality than talking about the positive aspects such as pleasure. The punitive and the puritanical come much more easily to us. And there is need to be careful about assumptions behind certain controlling measures, the tone and language used.

Fifth Session: Roundtable discussion on the recent UGC questionnaire

Chair: Prof. Jasodhara Bagchi

Jasodhara Bagchi felt that the discussion should not only look into the questionnaire but also look at contextual problems that are there. The questionnaire can be downloaded from the website and sent to UGC, she informs all discussants. Many teachers present attest that the questionnaire has not been circulated in their institutions.

It was suggested that the questionnaire should see women's presence in institutions of higher education more holistically and positively and broaden their approach from a focus on safety of women on campus to their general well-being.

All discussant agree that the question 'have you received complaints' should be expanded to include what kinds of complaints and why. A question on 'what provisions do you have for the well being of students' should be included. Among provisions suggested are spaces where STI and HIV/ AIDS related advice can be given to students as well as installing condom vending machines. Instead of focusing on 'safety' the approach should be more positive. There should be a question on sports and recreation facilities on the campus and the access of female students to these.

Section two should be on infrastructure and the questions rephrased so that just a yes/no answer cannot be given and more details can be provided. Among infrastructural facilities, a creche and day care centre and centre to address issues of students with disabilities should be included.

Just talking about safety is insidious as all sorts of disciplinary and punitive measures can be taken which will actually curtail the mobility and freedom of women on campus. Moreover, the questionnaire needs to ask about Complaints' committees' role in gender sensitization. There should be questions on awareness generation and dissemination of information that the committees are also supposed to undertake. Also, discussants bring up the issue of self-sensitization of the committee/cell particularly in handling alternative sexualities. Counselling Cells and Health Units must also be sensitized to issues of gender and sexuality. The sensitization of teachers and administrative staff must be made compulsory especially and linked to career advancement and promotions. The need for a compulsory, marked project on gender by all students across disciplines is also reiterated.

On the whole, it was strongly suggested that gender sensitization should not be seen as disaster management but as an integral part of an enjoyable campus life which girls and boys cherish. This involves an understanding of the burden of 'common sense' that each of us brings to the institution as also the assumptions that the institution implicitly stands for.

The colloquium closes with a word of thanks from the chair Jasodhara Bagchi.