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The CCYSC Awaaz – Ep 26: A girl child's voice too matters



In conversation with Supriya Ghosh – A product of Azim Premji University, content development coordinator at Language and Learning Foundation Delhi

Founder Colourful Story Mind: In conversation with Deepty Victor

Introduction: Hello everyone and welcome to today's episode of CCYSC awaaz. I am Deepty Victor and our guest today is Supriya Ghosh. She is from Patna, Bihar and has been working in the field of education for nearly seven years and has engaged with teachers and children in various capacities. We will tell Supriya's story in two parts. In this episode of CCYSC Awaaz, Supriya will talk to us about the struggles faced by girl children, especially girl children with disabilities.

Deepty (D): Hi Supriya, welcome to this session.

Supriya (S): Hi Deepty, how are you doing?

(D): I'm fine, hope you are also doing well. (...) We will begin with the session.

I'll ask you to tell us a little bit about yourself and your background?

(S): Thank you Deepty. So, as you already mentioned, I'm from Bihar. I come from a very humble background. I have been taking care of myself from 10th grade regarding financial expenses and it was since that time onwards when understanding of myself began. Then I moved on with my graduation from Patna Women's College. Post which because there was a pressing need to earn money. I had a choice of whether to go for higher studies or just get married.

I am partially a disabled child. I made a choice that I'll study and take a job. I was getting a job in BPO Kolkata. I opted for it as back then in 2008 it was the only option available. In three years of my work, I realized that this was not my calling. I was just doing this job, so that I can escape from marriage and earn for my family as well.

I then decided I'll do my B.ED. I pursued it from PWC (Patna Women's College) again. Then I was a teacher in Delhi Public School Patna. I was a teacher there for 3 years. In the last year of my teaching, I realised that this was not my calling either. Not saying that teaching is any less but I thought that I should be working with the marginalized section and went on for my higher studies again. I felt something was lacking and didn't know what it was.

I went ahead and did my masters from Azim Premji University. I think that's when a lot of things changed for me. My World view changed. The way I looked at myself and made meaning of the world around me and the way I looked at marginalization. The entire understanding of the charity model and right based model dawned upon me that is, I'm not doing things because they need me. I'm the giver and they are the receivers when it comes to marginalization. My internships during education and job with Akanksha Foundation, Mumbai led by one of the government schools under the NGO.

A lot of understanding about children and their mental health. How socio-emotional understanding and safety leads to cognitive development. I worked there for 2 years.

Later, I joined the Language and Learning Foundation in Delhi. It works on early grade literacy (grades 1,2,3,4 now). Soon they are getting into foundational literacy ECCE and multilingual education (they have been working on the basics in multilingual education for quite some time). I work with the content team to build curriculum and instructional design. So, till now, this is my journey in terms of what I've done. I think when we will get into the further discussion, I'll be able to describe how I have engaged with different sections and communities

(D) It was interesting to know about the work field, education and how your interests got molded in what you are doing now?

The next question I will be asking is, what disabilities do you have and how did this disability shape your childhood?

(S): It's a very personal and interesting journey for me. Supriya in 2020 is not what she was way back in 2010. There is a huge change. It's my disability that has shaped me. When I was two and a half years young, I was detected with an eye tumor and I didn't know. I hear stories of it as I have no recollection of it. What must have happened and how my parents would have settled with the idea of this case. I have been told that this was detected, while I was playing with one of my father's friends. He felt that I was not able to see with one of my eyes and which was my left eye.

They hurried to the doctors as well as religious rituals. Then they realized it's not going to work. It was said that only a month left for me and it's going to spread. So, my parents had a decision that either they wait for a month and let that kill me or take a risk and see if it works. So, it was a very dicey situation for them. I think my mother stayed strong then. She thought if she had to die then why not sooner than later and what if she survives. She was the major decision-maker and we sailed together and I survived.

But there were different junctures in my life, when I felt I would have died. I prayed to God this is what had to happen with me and this is how people are going to make me feel, I should have died earlier.

This starts from very early on. When you were talking about womanism and double operation I feel, it was told by an elder in my family and extended family that she is a girl and to make my life more they said she will lose her eyes and will become a burden. So why waste money on her treatment. This is something I got to know when I grew up. This is like double operation or double marginalization. Thus, their words clearly meant that first she is a girl and second disabled. She is just a burden' and it was way back in the 1990's. This is how it began and for most of the time, I've lived. Now it less affects or bothers me because I've made peace with who I'm and how I look.

This was not the case when I was growing up because I have a prosthetic or cosmetic eye and I can't wear it for a longer duration. I would not be allowed to stay late for weddings or marriages. I've attended a few marriages in my life because people around me will get uncomfortable as if my eyes get watery, itches and people around the world get uncomfortable with it.

(D): You had to put that eye away as I was speaking to you before.

(S): Yes, right as I had to put that eye away and I was not allowed to meet people without putting that eye. Generally, at home, I used to put away my eyes as my right eye was perfectly fine though I wear aspects I don't have in my left eye that is how I look. I was not allowed to meet anyone if I refused to put that left eye that is how I look. I will be told not to meet if I don't wear my left eye. I was an obedient child and thought they say because they care for me. Yes, they care but they were more scared of how people would react. A kind of stigma.

There have been several episodes that have cost my self-esteem and I have been a kind of 'poor thing' as I don't have an eye, won't be able to do anything in life, I'm a burden and many other comments.

One of the incidents was when I was in school. I had a verbal duel with one of my classmates (all in innocence). She took papers from my notebook. I complained about it to the teacher. The teacher was supportive as I was very obedient and the teacher's pet, I must say that. I said that I'm not going to share my notebook for her to cover the previous left overwork that she missed and as I don't share so she tore the pages from my notebook. This was in grade 7. The next day the teacher called her parents. She came pretty early in the morning. It was before assembly that is pre-assembly time. This girl speaks to other girls from the same class and section spreading this news to a few of them. She asked them not to talk to me because someone in her family said "if you see a blind person in the early morning of the day the whole day would be spoiled."

Here, after people behaved differently and this shattered me. I was not able to understand what suddenly happened. Then came Karma theory. I've lived with a lot of karma theory, that is, people saying, you have made a lot of mistakes in your past that you are suffering in this life.

(D): Ya and people have a different notion of karma throughout the World. I don't think people are suffering or have difficulties because of past mistakes named as karma. What do you think about this?

(S): For me, Karma is action and its consequence and you don't have to wait for the afterlife for that. It happens in that life. The kind of work you do you get rewarded and if you do not do the work, you do not get the reward.

Me not possessing an eye is my karma. It's like holding you responsible for what has happened to you in the past. I'm going through a tough time and people are constantly telling me that you have something that has led you to this suffering. So, imagine the stigma one has to face including the pain she has.

(D): When you describe Karma, I remember the poem ***Night of the Scorpion*** by Nissim Ezekiel. Where the mother was stung by the scorpion and now in pain and her suffering is

because of the past mistakes she had done. I think it's not Karma. It's something natural. Such creatures are there in our ecosystem, like snakes or others. People get stung by them. Even any other problems that people face can be due to genetic disorders. Simply to satisfy ourselves we say it's karma.

(S): Ya, it's a way of saying that it's beyond our control. Our understanding of disability and how the parliamentarian or people in power should be addressing the issues. They have been neglecting it for the longest time and simply saying whatever you are facing is all the wrongdoing that you did in the past so bear with it. That is why a lot of provisions did not come into the picture. Then the only solution is for the orthodox believer to overcome that just adding to the frustration. Because of all this, I faced a lot of social segregation, stigma, humiliation and positive discrimination. As one, I overheard people in the family, relatives and extended constantly saying to their kids that if she can do it why can't you.

The catch here is it was positive discrimination in the reference to what I don't have. So my pet name is Jhooma. They used to say in Bengali as "Jhooma" doesn't have two eyes but one. If she doesn't have an eye and still, she can study well and score well then you have two eyes, why can't you score. So, reference was always made for what you have and what you don't have. It's always a constant battle and struggle between have and the have nots.

(D): I think there are drawbacks in our education or parenting. Parents need not compare to someone else for their score.

A child should score on what talent one has. It's not by degrading others and motivating their kids to push to score more or better. Whatever they are going to score is their will and hard work.

(S): Our society, or in the global society, they compare their kids to neighbours and it happens most of the time. It's worse when you are disabled. It's because there is no positive discrimination regarding being equal. I'm lesser than the other person in a different sense and not according to the ability each possesses. It's that she is lesser than others as she is not normal and you are. So, most of the time I was unable to understand what was being said and whatever was said was a good or bad thing.

A lot of these things pop up early on. In my 10th grade, my parents were asked to marry her because no one will marry. My existence, the longest there has been will come a man in my life who would rescue me and make my life better. This man has to be kind and generous to accept me. I've lived with this feeling. It's general in India that you are born to marry and you will have a happy life if you are married.

(D): Yes, and you exactly don't know the one you will get married to who is going to rescue you, will value you or not for what you are or who you are and the thought process you have. It's not accepting the body but the mind and the soul.

(S): I grew up (my adolescence time) with the idea that nobody is going to love me or care for me because I have this problem and I'll never get married because till now, no such man has been born who would accept me for who I am. So, I used to look for a man, a godly kind who would rescue me.

It's been very challenging. So, I moved to APU (Azim Premji University) accepting myself as I'm who I am and comfortable in my skin. Still have not been able to accept everything. My idea of empowerment is when I'm able to address gathering with the only eye that I have and not wear the prosthetic eye. It will be that day when I'll feel liberated and empowered. Unfortunately, I still don't have that courage.

(D): I hope so. one day you get that courage and people start excepting what a person is and not judge on another ground.

(S): I hope so, but a lot of conditioning doesn't allow me to take that chance.

(D): I think you have answered the next question, that is, what difference did you notice how you were treated vs how a boy was treated (as a disabled person)?

(S): I'll keep the answer brief as part of it I've already answered. I was listening to the idea of **Womanism** by Alice Walker and in Sociology, it will be called double marginalization and branching of how this double marginalization looks like for women. I also try to place what it felt like for me.

Let's say there is a boy (guy) and a girl. This boy is disabled but he is a boy. He will be discriminated a little less. The strangest story of realization that I have had during my engagement with a set of visually impaired children during my internship day back in A.P.U. (Azim Premji University). I lived with them for a week and the way they make sense of their environment. What I realized was, they are not considered sexual human beings and that's the reality. I have seen it with my interaction after that. Before that, this didn't even strike me. With me also It didn't strike because girls can't claim their sexuality. Generally, if you see the spectrum of disabled people, we deny their right of sexual desire and sexuality. Do not look at it and we do not consider them to be sexual and so is the case with women look at it. But still, a man will get early way a woman cannot. Then this marginalization gets worse.

I consider myself to be privileged. I am a Hindu woman but imagine how it would be like to be a woman, a disabled and a Dalit or any minority community. It just gets worse. Disability is also a spectrum. I'm again fortunate to not be on the last ladder of this stair to be called so, and towards the right and not towards the left as I don't have my left eyes. Imagine somebody who

is visually impaired and think of a boy and a girl both completely visually impaired. I think it won't take time for any of us to understand who will be exploited more. If she comes to be from a Dalit or poor family. I can't even imagine what will happen. This is something I realized after reading Anita Ghai. My days of staying with visually impaired children for me longest again I thought it's a homogeneous setup and these things happen with every girl but no it made me realize much later the inter-sexuality and then I started observing.

Yes, there is discrimination and biases that you will see between the male and the female counterpart. Let's say by God's grace they are getting married. The chances of getting a disabled man getting a counterpart will be a little easier task than a female disabled body to get a match. Disability is the category. You will get someone in that category only but men will have a better chance than a woman would.

In this entire notion, there is a catch. Here a man who is disabled get an abled body. I'm putting "abled" in quote and quote because it is a touch of sarcasm in the word abled body. I mean by medical conditions that person is not feeling challenged as the other would. A man gets a woman or maybe in love with this woman and get married. The man will be told he is lucky and more than that it will be told that this girl would be there and this has high probability because this girl has a concern, care or she is in true love with him or this man has a lot of fortune with him.

On the contrary, if the man is abled body and woman is disabled then the man will be called a massager or God, rescuer or a Messiah. There are power dynamics also. So, the woman is out of love and is there with him because of the man's fortune but a man is with the woman because he wanted to change her life, give her love and care. He is equated to someone who is benign and generous and not out of love. So yes, gender does shape your experiences.

Conclusion: In this episode, Supriya shared her experiences of growing up with a visual impairment and the social and emotional struggles this caused. In the next part of this conversation with her, we will talk more about mental health and other issues. A big thank-you to Supriya from the CCYSC team for her generosity in sharing her story.