

The Power of a Second Chance

Dr. Daphne Pillai

In the panel discussion, Dr. Daphne Pillai said, “In India when we are dealing with issues such as women’s education and women’s empowerment, it is very important that we understand it in the light of its socio, cultural and historical context. Historically in India the woman has been relegated to the domestic sphere. And this is the mindset of the father, the mother, the brother, the sister, the husband and society at large. However, there have been many socio-economic barriers that had made women to miss out on the first chance in Education. They are poverty, early marriage, child marriage, the geographical distances to the school specially, in rural and tribal areas, where there is no public transportation and the children have to walk to school. As there are no proper toilets or sanitary facilities in the schools in these areas, the parents would prefer to keep the girl child in the home rather than send her to schools which are far flung from the areas where they live. Then there is also the caste system prevailing in India. We have the upper castes and the lower castes. The lower castes are segregated and sometimes corporal punishment is meted out to them. And in the rural and tribal areas it is quite common for teachers to single out students from the lower castes to do manual scavenging like cleaning of the toilets. So going to school becomes very undesirable for these students. Then there is also the issue of custom and culture. The custom of dowry is still prevailing. Dowry is the monetary gift given to the girl at the time of her marriage. So the male child is considered an investment while the girl child is considered to be an expense and a liability. Then there are also situations like when a crisis occurs in the family, it is the girl child who is plucked out of school to attend to a sick member of the family or to attend to the domestic chores.

Keeping all these barriers in mind, how do we as educators deliver the second chance?

As enablers we should first identify the environment: the need which could be either geographical (slum, rural, tribal areas), situational (migrant workers who live in shanties around areas where construction activities are going on) circumstantial (poverty, crisis situations, etc.)

The second need is to create the awareness of the availability of a second chance which addresses all the factors and the insecurities. This awareness can be created by sending field workers and counselors to the area.

The third commitment is to deliver the second chance where skills are imparted depending on their needs and aptitude thereby facilitating their integration into civilized society.

Let me highlight on two of the projects that we have been doing in this area. In one project we took as our target population women from the slum area. We created the awareness that the second chance opportunity was being made available to them in our campus. Our field workers and social workers were sent to the area to announce the Adult Literacy Drive that we were undertaking in one of our campuses which was walking distance away. There was a huge enrolment rate among women in the age range of 25 years to 40 years as they were all looking out to improve their lot. From our experience we see that these women have low self esteem and lack self confidence. For these women the second chance is not acquiring a University Degree, but they were drawn towards spoken English skills and some income generating skill. There is a tremendous sense of alienation created in them due to the fact that they can't speak English. This again is historical baggage that we have inherited due to the two thousand old caste system which created segregation between the upper castes and the lower castes. It is also the shadow of the colonial rule which created a class system on who studied English and who did not. So these women associate spoken English with social mobility and some kind of status. The other skill that they desired was an income generating skill for self sufficiency and financial empowerment. For these women we started tailoring, embroidery and the making of creative handicrafts. The

spoken English skills and the occupational and livelihood opportunities given to them raises and restores their self-esteem and gives them the necessary self-sufficiency for financial empowerment.

In a second project we took as our focus area school dropouts in the age range of 18 years to 25 years. They went in a big way for beauty care and hair styling, basic hardware skills, desk top printing like graphic designing, Corel Draw, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, catering, hospitality, others.

There are many problems encountered by the facilitators in delivering the second chance;

One of the formidable barriers is the lack of awareness that a second chance opportunity is available. The government offers formal structures through distance education and open schooling. Sometimes information about the informal structures of the second chance like skill development programs that NGO'S undertake does not reach the masses due to lack of proper information systems.

Very often the opposition comes from within the family itself. Either the father is reluctant to give the girl child an education as the mindset prevailing is that the girl child has to be married off and given a dowry, so why send her to school. If the girl is married she finds resistance from her husband who does not wish her to be financially

independent. Again the husband feels that he will face ridicule in the community as he is supposed to be the provider, the bread winner and the wife is expected to be the homemaker.

Women find it very difficult to reconcile their work and domestic responsibilities. Women who hail from the disadvantaged segment of society have to do their household chores before going to work and even after returning from work. The work is exhausting as they have to do the cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, washing the utensils and doing the laundry manually. There are no machines to do the job for them. Unlike developed countries where even a poor home has continuous water supply, here women who hail from slums and rural and tribal areas have to go to the public tap and wait in line for their turn to get water. In tribal areas the women have to carry their load to the well, draw the water and wash the clothes. So by the end of the day they either do not have the time or they are too exhausted to educate themselves.

Women face a lot of stigmatisation when they work late hours. They become vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation at the workplace. They are frowned upon by the community, the neighbours and the family itself. So very often they are compelled to leave their jobs due to family and community pressures.

Many of these women suffer from a deep psychological insecurity which stems from losing out on the first chance. There is that inherent diffidence and lack of self esteem they face because of language barriers specially, lack of knowledge of Spoken English which they feel will inhibit their entry into a social environment.

Women also have the low confidence issue due to years of subjugation and for generations they have been pigeon holed into traditional roles making it extremely difficult for them to cast off the moulds they are expected to fit into.

How do we achieve sustainability for these women?

Our role as facilitators does not end after delivering the second chance. We follow it up with enabling help to practice their skills and sustain themselves. We do this by negotiating loans from banks for them, we teach them to invest them in bank schemes to make their money grow as well as to gain some kind of financial credibility. We can also negotiate with companies to buy their products and use their services as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). We can also help them to host websites displaying their works so that traditional crafts can get global mileage. Another way to help them sustain in the global market is to teach them how to use smart tools like the internet and the computer.

With self-sufficiency comes financial empowerment and with financial empowerment comes change. The fruits of the second chance will be visible in subsequent generations as these women who have benefitted from the second chance will fight for their girls' right to have an education and to follow their dreams and fulfill their goals.

The power of the second chance will be visible in subsequent generations as these women who are now empowered will fight for the right of their children to have an education and ensure that they are sent to school and finish their schooling.

On the part of the enablers it is a modest goal to pull out women from the poorest level to a self-respecting, more dignified, self-sustaining life.”

Dr Daphne Pillai was one of the five international panelists at the Soroptimist International Convention held in Turkey, Istanbul from July 9th-July 12th, 2015.