

A Safe Workspace without Discrimination

December 2, 2008, Chennai

CII and Prajnya organized a workshop, 'Creating Safer Workspaces,' as part of the Prajnya 16 Days Campaign against Gender Violence on December 2, 2008 at the Accord Metropolitan in Chennai.

The workshop began with a moment's silence in memory of the heroes and victims of the Mumbai terror attacks. The inaugural session drew attention to the importance of addressing gender violence issues across the board and placed the workshop in the context of the Prajnya 16 Days Campaign against Gender Violence. Gender violence as described as power-play and the workplace as an arena for this power-play. The speakers were Nalini Krishnan, Chairman of the Corporate Social Responsibility Sub-Committee of the Confederation of Indian Industries, and Swarna Rajagopalan, Managing Trustee of Prajnya.

Sandhya Rao led the workshop. She is an experienced trainer on workplace issues and one of the founders of Hengasara Hakkinna Sangha, which is arguably India's leading NGO specializing in the areas of policy, law and governance relating to workplace sexual harassment.

The workshop began by exploring the various meanings, understandings and experiences of 'discrimination' and 'gender.' Comparative equality, formal and substantive, were identified as the hallmarks of a safe workplace. Unfair practices, denial of opportunity, gender-insensitive benefits detract from such an ideal. The session recalled the UN definition of discrimination as anything prevents people from attaining their full potential.

Following this discussion, a Forum Theatre exercise was carried out by the participants where they described work-place discrimination. They were subsequently divided into groups and asked to discuss the question, "What kind of workplace environment would you create to have a safer workplace?"

In response, the participants prescribed attitudinal change at both an individual and organizational level. Mentoring, role models, diversity training and counselling could contribute to this process. The behavioural goal was to create a non-discriminatory space from before recruitment onwards. One-on-one meetings, awareness programmes, discussion groups might contribute to the latter.

The workshop culminated in a panel discussion to brainstorm what has worked and what has not in a variety of settings. The panelists were Gayatri Shriram (industrialist), Vijay Nagaswami (counsellor), Nalini Rao (Social worker and educator); Shantha Kamath (psychiatrist); Saras Bhaskar (psychologist); S. Shivakumar (journalist); MDV Kumaraswamy (Management professional).

Each of them brought to the panel perspectives gleaned from research and managerial experience. Dr. Nagaswami advocated the definition and recognition of one's boundaries as an element of a safe workspace, a process that should begin as early as school. Peer support and counselling was another element. Organizations should provide counselling and referral services. They should commit to following the Visakha judgment guidelines to setting up and implementing redressal procedures for sexual harassment. The importance of a 'code of conduct' that is mandatory and implemented and of access to women's organizations and support groups within the organization were stressed. Discrimination and tolerance of sexual harassment should be regarded as bad business practice, panelists and participants agreed. It was strongly suggested that the top management of companies should be invited to such workshops and not just human resources managers. Similarly, this session stressed that small and medium enterprises needed to be engaged with this issue as much as the large corporates who were in attendance at the workshop (Caterpillar, Ford, TCS, Sathyam and Scope, for instance).



Sandhya Rao, trainer interacting with participants



Sandhya Rao, Trainer speaking at the symposium on safe spaces



Swarna Rajagopalan, Founder of Prajnya making her presentation at the safe spaces symposium



Participants make a presentation