

Given below is a model panel discussion. Please note that it is not an actual one. The persons named are known to share similar views on women issues as quoted in this imaginary discussion.)

Activity II Panel Discussion (Unit I – Lesson: Matchbox)

Q: Prepare the script of a speech welcoming the panelists and introducing them to the audience.

A: Moderator: Ms Geethu Mohandas; Actor-Director: Good Morning to all,

I am most happy to stand before you today with a panel of most eminent personalities including Smt. Sugatha Kumari, poetess and women activist, Smt. Sunita Krishnan founder of Prajwala; an NGO based in Hyderabad and Smt. Kavita Krishnan, secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA).

As you might be aware, we are all to be part of the great and timely process of women empowerment. As the panel discusses the topic 'Indian women – finding a space in the socio-cultural milieu', let's pray for that day of total realization of women's power in which they can live with dignity and happiness.

I am sure that members of the audience are familiar with Smt Sugatha Kumari. 'Sugatha Kumari teacher' as she is often called is not only a poet and environmentalist but also the founder of Abhaya, home for mentally shattered women. Teacher started the home in 1985 after she was appalled by the condition of women housed at the Government Mental Hospital, Thiruvananthapuram.

Smt Sunita Krishnan is often called 'Woman of steel' because she has drawn strength from personal experience and has stood up as a pillar of strength supporting other women and young girls. 'Prajwala' is an organization based in Hyderabad. Ms Sunita co-founded it along with Bro. Jose Vettikattil in 1996. It is an NGO assisting trafficked women, girls, children and transgenders through opening the doors of education and employment.

Smt Kavitha Krishnan, Secretary of AIPWA is an energetic communist – feminist activist who has been at the forefront of the discourse which publicized the problem of violence against women following the 2012 Dec 16 Delhi gang rape against 'Nirbhaya'.

Let me heartily welcome our expert panel members to the discussion. I extend a warm welcome to the audience too. Let us now listen to the speaker's views about the space enjoyed by India's women in the present cultural milieu.

Panel Discussion

Smt Kavitha Krishnan: Good Morning to all. As we discussed today about Indian women of today, I would like to express my confidence that the fight for gender equality in India will succeed. We will have to fight together for their emancipation of women. First of all it is important to have a realistic base to our efforts. In this context I have a quarrel to take up with the Media.

The media does not want to look at real women in misery or in their moments of achievements. A good number of ads in the media present them as painted dolls and are denied a voice of their own. Ads from those of soap to jewellery present women with flawless skin and perfect bodies. These ads with sensuous postures are misleading especially for the young since they tend to imitate television models.

Our young girls are captured in a fantasy world where they are required to use cosmetics to change their complexions or take diets for shaping themselves according to the trends. In their obsession for presenting themselves fashionably, their attention is diverted from solid steps like education and health care that can make them stronger as individuals. Why doesn't the media project realistic and positive role models of women? It should stop being so irresponsible and misleading.

Smt Sugatha Kumari: There is no doubt that emancipation of women is incomplete without ensuring their health. Teenaged girls must certainly be broken off their media-centric self image. Another problem which affects women's health adversely is early marriage. Teenage pregnancies are accompanied by physiological problems. Several young mothers have knocked the doors of Abhaya with an infant in hand and another in the womb, harrowed by problems like alcoholism and apathy of husbands.

Kavitha Krishnan: Well, we cannot expect perfect circumstances. We need to cultivate mental strength and mental toughness. We must face our fears and control our responses in the face of barriers. Women must be strong because in the highly criminalized society any woman can be a victim at any moment.

Women's movements can change mind sets more than any formal gender sensitization procedures. Freedom without fear is what we need to protect.

Smt Sunita Krishnan: There is the argument for creating a convenient, productive and harmonious work environment for women. It is all about finding a space where equal wages and safe work conditions are ensured. At Prajwala our strategy is to rehabilitate women and children who are victims of sex trafficking by giving their children education and career opportunities.

After years of guiding and mentoring the women I am often overwhelmed with happiness when I see the victims who have become survivors today living and adjusting in normal mainstream society. Since Prajwala's inception in 1996 over 5081 women were integrated with their families.

Smt Sugatha Kumari: Let's not forget that today Indian women have excelled in each and every field from social work to visiting space stations. My experience is that a woman who is empowered has respect and concern for fellow human beings. She is herself committed to be a liberator and protector of the marginalized. She respects the environment and passionately believes in a war-free, eco-friendly, humane society. She brightens up her environment with the light of love. Today women certainly have the courage to live up to this role. Hence Indian women can enjoy their own meaningful space in the socio-cultural milieu.

Smt Sunita Krishnan: Yes and that space is for the stronger and self-sufficient Indian woman whose birth is keenly awaited!

Smt Kavitha Krishnan: True!...certainly.

Moderator's conclusion

Ms Geethu Mohandas: On reviewing what we discussed today it cannot be denied that we have become witnesses to the beginning of a genuine and passionate effort to achieve true empowerment of our women.

It has been rightly observed that the unreality projected by the media is doing lot of harm to our young girls. As Smt Kavitha Krishnan pointed out women need to be strengthened through education and health care. She has rightly stressed the role of women's movements in building a culture which allows women freedom without fear.

Smt Sugatha Kumari has noted how women can become helpless destitutes due to social evils like alcoholism. The greatness of this mentor of mentally sick women is greatly inspiring. Her observation that enlightened women should spread the light of love in their environment is a highly apt message.

Smt Sunitha Krishnan's work is undoubtedly awe inspiring. It is her immense dedication that makes her a full time volunteer guiding women, girls and other marginalized sections of society towards a better existence. As she rightly remarks education and employment can help women find self sufficiency and strength.

It is my great privilege to take this opportunity of thanking the panelists of our discussions. I thank the members of the audience for their presence and co-operation. We are all enlightened on the various aspects of women empowerment. Let's hope that the day is not far away at whose dawn women all over the country will be strong and self-sufficient. Let's work together for women empowerment.

Thank you.

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