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KAMALNAYAN BAJAJ CONFERENCE ROOM

Panel Discussion | Empowering Girls though Education

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Moderator

PROCEEDINGS

Harsha Vardhana Singh: I was thinking about the kind of things which we are trying to pursue here at Brookings India, a research project on innovation and education and how to expand and scale up, so it's called a scale up plan, we've begun that. Urvashi is one of the prominent names we have in our expert advisory group and innovation and activity chain which comprise education in system and mindset. Some very insightful comment we've seen from both our speakers and I thank you immensely for that. I thank you for the encouragement we have got, Honourable Chief Minister, and that brings this part of the program to an end. We will now continue with the panel discussion, so thank you again.

Ms Dipta Bhog, Ms Sunita Singh, Ms Moni Kannaujiya for the panel with the author, Ms Urvashi Sahni also here. So, the panel discussion will be coordinated by Ms Dipta Bhog.

Dipta Bhog: Good evening everyone, it's a pleasure to be here and I'd like to the Honourable Chief Minister of Rajasthan, [Varsuonsra and Vijaji Hash] and Urvashi and both of you Abdul Lokobri, Siguiriya, [speaks foreign language].

I really felt this is such a heart-warming account and it's passionate and I'm reading just like you, I couldn't put the book down. I told Urvashi that, that once I started it, it's so readable and it's so accessible and yet it has a conceptual framework within it which I think it's really really important, so you managed to pull that

together. And so, I'll just make a few comments on the book before I start with the questions. I feel that in over a decade actually since SSA, we've been working on universalizing education, we've been talking a lot about inclusion, bringing in children from all walks of life and in particular, girls that's been a big focus for [Dozhier] and I know that she's worked really hard and we've been together on many efforts on that front. And I think '*Reaching for The Sky*', the book actually, focuses on the idea of right not merely as a question of access or of recording the presence of girls but it's actually looking at what do we do with this right. So, what do we do when the girls are in school, when they come in there, what is it that we do with them. And I think that it's very beautifully put on page 163, I just want to read those lines and I think that it says quite succinctly, "our educational rank orders this knowledge, this capacity at the top, we are guided by the understanding that once they develop this capacity, our girls can develop other capabilities including academic learning. The converse is not necessarily true, mere academic learning will not necessarily involve girls. The girls' lives and words vindicate our ideology and practice". I think it really says that we have to go beyond imagining not just academic learning for girls who are disadvantaged, it's actually pushing us beyond that and saying we have to think of what is the larger outcome of education and I think that's really really critical today.

The other thing I think, Urvashi, that you've done very beautifully is that you've really made your politics very explicit and you talk about

being a feminist educator and I think not many people admit that. And I think that it shows us that schooling is imbedded and located in a political understanding of power and it's not just in terms of social relations. You're not just talking about power and girls come from marginalized community, you're actually in some of the chapters talking about, particularly when you're talking about the theatre and the drama and the poetry that the girls did, you're actually really talking about the power of knowledge. Who creates language, who has the power to create that knowledge, what kind of knowledge is being considered as knowledge, so I think you take on these questions really well in the book and I think that's really really... and how do we create knowledge, I think that's been a big question with feminists, the processes of knowledge creation. So, that knowledge creation with the girls; you talk about sitting and doing these extensive workshops, engaging, learning from them, so it's like a two-way process, so that's been quite fascinating.

I also feel that this book is really important from the perspective of research because in the last 10 - 15 years, a lot of data has been generated; we know about who is in school, who is completing, who is participating and who is being pushed out, we know all these things now, we have a sense of it. But I think we have a big gap in knowledge about the processes of gendering and inclusion or exclusion that are within the boundaries of the school and I think we are getting an insight here, which is within the walls of the school, what is happening and what is going on and I think you have described that;

what is possible. You've also talked about it's a project of possibility, it's not just, you know, these are the givens and we're just changing things but it's also a link of the self with the aspiration, so that's been quite beautifully put. And in a way, you're saying that the experience of Prerna rally opens up this question of, when we're looking at gender questions within the boundaries of the school, that everything is informed by that, whether it's the management, is it working, it's the system of education, it's a teacher and student relations, so you've talked a lot about that. So, it's a very thick and good description of what is within the school and what is possible within the school, which I think is really wonderful. And I think the most beautiful thing is what comes across when reading the book is that working with girls is a long-term investment, it's not a one day, it's not a one-year issue, it's not two years, it's really a very long period.

So, I'd like to shoot off my first question to you which is that the book has been written in a very interesting way; you are there, the girls are there, the teachers are there. So, can you tell us a little bit about the process of writing this book and what it meant to be not just a single author, we've been hearing everybody's been saying it's a collective enterprise, if you can share a little bit about that.

Urvashi Sahni: Thank you very much, first of all, all of you for taking the time to read it and for such a close reading, thank you very much and I say that on behalf of my entire team, our girls here and then all of us. In terms of the process, I think the process

mirrors the pedagogical process of the school, which is a participatory one. And my whole purpose of this was that most of the writing about education, the discussions around girls' education and the debates around it, they are all done from a thousand miles in the air perspective, so that they're done from the perspective of academics, policy planners, educators and the subject where they're about, the girls' voices and the girls' lives are totally missing. So, in this, the goal was to really say it from the perspective of the students and of the teachers and the key stakeholders. So, in this book, '*The Story of Prerna*', the girls call attention to their lives, they talk about the struggles and their challenges and then they talk about how a particular kind of education worked for them or not and what it did for them. So, the whole process was, first of all, reflecting on the long journey that we've been through and then really interviewing six of the girls, they could have been many but these six are the ones who were amongst the first ones who joined and then they stayed the course and we have been in touch with them forever, we've been in touch with many more but these ones particularly. And also, they were willing to share their personal stories and really, they want that everyone just reads their stories as stories of great resilience, triumph and courage. And I asked them, I said "you know, why are you sharing them?" and I have quotations but let me just say it from them, they said "no, we want everybody to know, first of all, what really happens in the lives. And secondly, any girl anywhere who wants to raise her voice, we want them to know that I could and look

where I am and she can and if we could triumph after everything we've gone through, surely they can and what education really means".

Then I wanted it to be from the perspective of teachers as well; that how do teachers expand their roles, because we used to work at Child Protection. Everyone talks about girls' education, "get them into school" and I won't labour the points that everyone has made but the point is they're not not coming to school because they don't want to, they're not not coming to school because they can't learn or dropping out, they're being pushed out, it is because they are girls as you mentioned, right. And so, if gender is the issue, then of course the solution has to be a gendered one. So, even in terms of the teachers, so how did they learn to expand their role to include a gender perspective, to include an enabling perspective, to include a mentoring perspective, how did they do that, that is one. And then also from the community perspective that how the parents perceive this kind of education, what did they do. So, the idea was to work this and to, in fact, include in it the theoretical frames from a feminist perspective and you're quite right, in fact, not only do we not make any bones about our political affiliation in the book but even with the parents, we are very open right from the first day that we have a feminist approach and you know everyone is terrified of the word 'feminist', not just here, whether it's in D.C. or it's Switzerland or it's at UNESCO, they're all terrified, nobody wants to use the word. And what is wrong with that if you're a democratic citizen, you're a feminist, it's as simple as that; democracy is a feminist project

because it's based on equality. So, here we're very clear about that, that we will be teaching girls their rights, we will be advocating for them, we will be teaching resistance and self-advocacy. The teachers will not only teach the girls to resist and advocate for themselves, they will work with parents and be their advocates and the girls will be advocates in the community as well because we believe it's really important and I really can't stop saying this, that gender discrimination has lethal consequences and we should take them very seriously. In fact, in Rajasthan, I trained some of your male principals, 71 of them from your model school, I personally did that and you know my joy, at lunchtime one of the men was walking with me and he said "[speaks foreign language]," I said [Speaks foreign language]", he said "[Speaks foreign language]" I said, "Sir, thank you." I didn't stop "siring" him and "thank-youing" him very much after that because you know thank God that he understood it and this is a principal in a model school in a remote area, shouldn't we all understand it?

So, we've tried very hard to explain the one simple central argument, really, that if education we think is the- it is the most powerful transformative path - but you know you have to transform education, you have to expand the idea of quality. Quality is not just learning to read, write and do math, I leant to read, write and do math, went to one of the best schools in Pune and maybe the country at the time, I didn't learn the important knowledge that I was an equal person. I had many academic skills, didn't know that I could use them for

myself. Like you, was married off shortly after that and didn't think that there was anything else I could do. It's an important learning that they must have and so we make that an educational goal, not a thing that you do after school or as life skills or as side empowerment but that's an important knowledge that you must have. And so that's the conceptual frame we worked with and then what are the various pedagogical processes that you can work with them. And this is not just for girls, if you read the epilogue, and we're in the process of doing that, [Anshar, Anna] and I are working out a curriculum for boys, so that how to we develop a feminist consciousness in boys; how did they learn to define masculinity differently; what does it mean to be a good man; what does it mean to be a strong man; how do we change that and you can do it and we hope to be developing that and presenting that very soon too.

So, the process really has been a collective one, everybody's voiced it and Moni was telling me, so she said she found her bed and she shared it with her mother and she says "look, this is what I've put in it, this is what I've said about you, about my family, about everyone" and the mother was deflated. And by the way, when the book came out or when there was an award or something, I got many calls from Rajasthan saying "we feel we've won", you know, so I now think that our community successes and community failures and community responsibility but the book is definitely a community book.

Dipta: So, my second question which is that today, if you look at the international discourse regarding adolescent girls, youths and

education, it's a discourse that's dominated by ideas of investment, efficiency, output and in your book, you are really talking about for you the outcome is development of girls' voices. So, from your experience, what are the two or three things that you really would like to advocate for India in terms of policy change both internationally or nationally?

Urvashi: You know, I cannot tell you how much it irritates me the utility idea in argument for girls' education. I know they say it's practical, it's not, it comes from a very instrumental view of girls and their lives. Even when people are advocating for girls' education, they are still thinking of girls as future mothers, for their reproductive, sexual and domestic value, that is all. First of all, how common-sensical and how redundant, of course, it will be work for the G.D.P. and everything else that it's supposed to work with. If you unleash the productive potential of [50%] percent of your population, why is that rocket science, it beats me and why we haven't understood it so far, beats me further. But my point is even if it didn't, girls still have a right to educate themselves because it is their right and because it is an enabler for them to achieve their full humanity and that's really important, so that's one.

And the second major, in fact, that's the one thing I want to happen in my lifetime and I hope it will and you know we should start in Rajasthan and New Delhi, everywhere, it is that we must include gender education in the official curriculum for boys and girls both. If you ask me, look at India, India's daughters - unsafe, unwanted, unequal -

we can say what we like. They're unsafe in the womb, they're unsafe at home, they're unsafe on the street and they're dying in droves, it's like war. So, shouldn't we address that? And every time there is an [earthquake] then people will say "oh, we need to change mindset", yeah, and why aren't we changing them in school? And every time people talk of quality education, it's only "let's add more technology, let's do more STEM, let's do more..." Well, countries have done it, why is it not equally important? If it is important to develop a mathematical imagination, a scientific imagination, what about the sociological imagination, what about a democratic imagination? We are not all fully developed democracy, we aren't, many countries aren't and we won't be unless we include citizenship learning and a feminist perspective in our curriculum. So, I would really strongly strongly strongly advocate that we change the curriculum, it's outdated, it's outdated, whether it's in Finland or anywhere. We need to change the perspective and include peace studies, include gender studies, include caste studies in India. Teach them what it means to be equal, and you know you can do it, it doesn't have to be exclusive, it's not "either-or", you can do it in the context of Math and Science and English and History like our girls have done. We focus on life outcomes then the learning outcomes follow. [Lerol] she's getting her Masters, so is Sunita and they've done brilliantly and plus, they're very strong empowered women with very strong feminist consciousness and most importantly, a very strong social and political consciousness.

And the third thing, I said two but I think one more, is that we need an open discourse on power in the classrooms. Everywhere I go, the other [bar-stick] in bad word is patriarchy, [speaks foreign language]. Yeah, we have patriarchal societies and yes, they are wrong, they're unjust, they're unfair, they're immoral, they're inconsistent with democracy and we should be discussing power; who has it, who does not and why not. If we believe in equality and we mouth it, it means you have to discuss power. So, I think there is a whole new move on social and emotional learning, I add, social, emotional and political learning. So, our curriculum must now include the development of a social, emotional and political consciousness, it's really for boys and girls both and you don't have to take Perna's model, it's one. But like you said, there is so much brilliant work happening, {Mahilla Samankir} did so much work and that was a political work. The women's movement has got us where we have, take it into the schools, it's very important. I don't know why it didn't occur to them that working with adult women is too late, you should be working with girls and boys and in school. So, I think my recommendation, and we've put it in the book, is that curriculum needs to change, pedagogical processes need to change and we should not fight shy of taking political steps because by default they're political, even when you don't do it, what you're saying is, "that I will maintain the status quo", that's also a political decision. So, we should be stronger about it and we should democratize schools and education, simply that.

Dipta: Thank you for that Urvashi, I completely agree with you that when we don't say it, we are actually promoting a status quo and it's really important to speak out and to be explicit and that's what I find wonderful about your book, is that it says it so clearly and categorically. Sunita, can I ask you some questions? You are pursuing a Master's Degree in social work. Tell us what you plan on doing after completing it and why is it that you chose social work as your subject?

Sunita Singh: I chose this field of education because there was a time when I was living in a village and there was no one to help me there. And it would not make any difference to me even if someone tried to. It was only after my admission in Prerna that I started realising with the guidance and support of the mentors and teachers around that here we work towards the empowerment of women. We learn about our rights, how to say things, develop our own opinion, how much to reveal and how much to conceal. I realised that there are only a handful of people who work for the rights of others. Aunty (Urvashi Sahni) has been my biggest inspiration and honestly, I want to grow up to become like her and do my bit for the welfare of women and that is why I chose social work for my Masters, and I'm in my final year now.

Dipta: In the book, you have shared about your life and the hardships you have endured. In the tumultuous situation in which your mother had to relocate from Chattisgarh to Lucknow. Tell us how you accumulated the strength to endure and battle such dismal conditions and how did Prerna contribute in aiding your endeavours?

Sunita: For a very long time we could not open up to others about our problems. When the teachers saw us for the first time in Prerna, they instantaneously knew that we were troubled and preoccupied. So when the aunties (we call our teachers 'aunties' in Prerna) started inquiring and communicating with us, we gradually started to open up and that provided us with the much-needed confidence to start understanding & fighting our own battles.

Dipta: You actively participated in writing poetry, hosting workshops, conducting theatres, among other things. What provided you with the strength to pursue all of this even while struggling in dire circumstances? Were the other girls in Prerna a big support? Tell us about your inspiration to fight against all odds

Sunita: Initially, I had the sense that only my world was riddled with problems. But after I went to Prerna, I started realising that the difficulties I endured were not exclusive to me. There were so many people whose situation were much worse than mine. That made me realise that my adversities were nothing compared to the sufferings that other girls at Prerna endured and this helped me deal with the situation immensely. Not only did we try improving our own situation, we also started actively seeking out ways of helping the other girls. We made a group in our village near the school to try and help the girls who did not have much help.

Moni: When I was in 3rd grade, teachers were not friendly and did not encourage us to participate in extra-curricular. They would beat us if we were absent or didn't complete our homework. I had to quit school

thereafter because of financial constraints. When I joined Prerna in the 5th grade, I was really apprehensive that it might turn out to be similar to my last experience. But on my first day, as nervous as I was, the demeanour of the teachers changed my perspective. They were genuinely friendly and concerned. When we could not understand a chapter or a topic, instead of losing patience or getting agitated, the teachers explained the chapter to us in the form of a drama by using us students as actors. They would make certain that everyone felt involved no matter what the form of activity. Some of the students who were more apprehensive and shy than the others were given special attention and encouraged to participate, and they did.

Dipta: Since you (Moni) are interested in photography I was wondering if you could portray a photographic image of what Prerna means to you.

Moni: Every school has a building but the smiling faces of Prerna make it stand out. No one is ever advised against chasing anything they want. You have the freedom to pursue and dream as you please. Our teachers also help our parents understand the value of educating us instead of getting us married early. For me, Prerna Is the amalgamation of these happy faces, my family, and the teachers'.

Dipta: When girls start expressing their opinion and begin talking, people in our society are quick to point out how they are going bad and disrespectful. Tell us how you respond to it and how you deal with such people?

Moni: When I was new in Prerna and we would share our problems with the teachers, I used to be really apprehensive about discussing the same with my family back home. For instance, when we had to go outside the house past six in the evening, our father would strongly deter it. Girls are expected to be home after dark and pretty much restricted to the confines of the kitchen. So we would ask our teachers for suggestions to help explain things to our parents better. Thereafter, when I told my father that he was wrong in confining us, he scolded me and said that ever since I started attending Prerna, I have been talking a lot more. My uncle came over one day and told my father that he should consider getting me married now that I have grown old. I was quick to cut him short and insisted that I wanted to study further and would not get married under any circumstance. When he remarked how smart I have become, I told him that we are encouraged to speak our minds and taught never to succumb to pressure in Prerna.

Dipta: Now listening to them admitting to such things makes us feel that maybe women are actually changing their attitude and approach and becoming independent.

Urvashi: To add to that, their friend Khusboo was being insisted by her family to get married although she was just 15. However, when she protested and we intervened as well, they decided to listen to us. But as soon as she turned 16, and even stood 1st in her final year in school, the parents said that she has achieved enough and they intended on taking her out of school and getting her married. I called the parents and tried explaining that they should allow her to

continue especially considering how well she was performing. But they insisted that was not going to happen and they might consider it once she gets married. Khusboo was adamant but they dismissed all her urges. They took her back home and beat her up for being obstinate. But we have an active network, with the help of which we managed to intervene and get the girl out and today the girl (Khusboo) has completed her Master's Degree in Women studies and is now set to embark on her Ph.D. and eventually become a professor. But my point is that parents don't believe that education is empowering, it's normally a good ticket to have in the marriage market. And he believed very firmly that he could control the girls' consciousness despite the education that somehow Kushpur had gotten away but the others he would control, which hasn't happened and now he has begun to change seeing where Khusboo is, he's begun to change. In many of them, we find that we never had too many fathers, now there are so many fathers coming to school; they come for the meeting, they come to drop their children, they call up and say "why isn't my daughter learning?" we're totally delighted. The number of child marriages has gone down and what I'm surprised is, enrolment from the first year where we had 80, went up to 1000 and in fact, we have to refuse now because we don't have the funding and we're trying to find more money to do that. But parents have not withdrawn their children despite the fact that we intervene if there's domestic violence, if there's child marriage, we have had to threaten that we'll call the police but we work with them to make them allies and actually, to make the girls allies. So, sometimes when I question parents, I say "we go against all your cultural norms, why

do you still come, why do you like Prerna?" So, they said it's good for them (the girls) and I think at heart they know that the school means their daughters well, that they know intuitively. That it might be going against what they want but eventually, they come around.

Moni: My brother is never questioned for returning home late at night. For the girls in the family, we have to specify exactly where we are going to and have to be home within the designated hour. If we are late, even by 10 minutes, we are interrogated about our whereabouts. We are four sisters, including me, in the family. We asked our parents that why is that only we have to answer about being late and no one ever questions our brother? So my mother advised me to question my brother if he comes home late the next time. So another day, when it was passed the time for him to return, I inquired where he had been. My brother told me that it was none of my business, then my mother intervened and said that if you could question her about being late, you also need to answer her if she inquires about the same. My father joined in too and commanded him to get back on time in the future. My brother was not too pleased and told us that you girls are going way ahead of yourself. To which we told him that if you want us to be home on time, make sure you do the same too.

Dipta: There are many people in this audience who work on education and different policies to improve learning. From your experience, what suggestion would you want to offer to them? What do you think they should be doing to improve the quality of education for women, especially girls from financially humble backgrounds?

Moni: My suggestion to them would be to work just like the way Prerna does towards the empowerment of women. Not just offering us textbook education but also delving beyond that and encouraging us to share our problem and to help us find a solution. We were made aware of our rights, about the law and order and most importantly about our sense of identity. Like today, the fact that I am capable enough to sit in front of an audience like you and share my views so confidently, I hope that more girls can realise their true worth and do what it takes to chase their dreams. So my message for you is that there is already enough being done to educate boys in our society. They are encouraged to study but we never receive that motivation. All the constraints, mental and financial are only at play when it comes to educating the girl child. I sincerely hope that you can change that attitude and help women receive the same education that they deserve.

Sunita: I would like to say a couple of things. I feel that one Prerna is not enough for all the girls in this country. I hope that every state has a school like this, and why just one, maybe more than that. Girls are in desperate need of such education and awareness. The other thing, I don't think that enough is being done on gender equality. To me, this is one of the major reasons why girls are still not encouraged to educate themselves. Even if they get enrolled in schools, it's just a matter of time before they drop out. So I sincerely hope that there are more schools like Prerna everywhere possible.

Dipta: Now. We can take some questions from the audience.
