

Our Voix Against Child Sexual Abuse—Sitting Down with Megha Bhatia

Megha Bhatia is the founder of Our Voix, a youth-run organisation that aims to prevent child sexual abuse. She has been the key figure in conducting workshops to sensitise children, teachers, and parents about sexual harassment along with her team. Winner of the prestigious India Volunteer Award 2019 and National Youth Icon Award 2019, she strives to empower children in a friendly manner and make their childhood a safe experience. We, at The MIT Post, got an opportunity to speak with her regarding Our Voix and her experiences so far. Catch her at TEDxManipal on 24th February 2019.



How and when did you start Our Voix, and how has your journey at the organisation been so far?

I started Our Voix in January last year when I came back from London. The journey has been challenging because when one starts an organisation like this, one realises that it is not all smooth. You get to know about your inhibitions too. Moreover, you get a deeper understanding of how society thinks about a sensitive issue like child sexual abuse. It has been a great learning experience as I have realised my own potential too.

Furthermore, we have gathered more than a hundred volunteers from different countries. We have gone from conducting a workshop for one child to over 500 kids. Overall, it has been an incredibly fulfilling experience.

After one of the workshops on preventive measures for Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), if a child confronts to the volunteers that he/she had been sexually harassed, how do you medically and psychologically assist the child?

It is something that has happened several times in the past. When we conduct these workshops, quite often children open up to us. We have a psychologist in our team who works at Ganga Ram Hospital, so we provide counselling to the victim. The next step is to take legal action, so we report the instance to the police and the child helpline number-1098. A support person comes from the child helpline, and we take the matter forward.

What are the challenges you face at organisational levels while pitching in the ideas to conduct such sensitive workshops at places like schools, welfare homes, localities, etc?

We face tons of challenges while organising these workshops because when we initially started, schools were reluctant in educating the kids about this issue. I remember conducting one such event at an orphanage, and the person in charge told me not to mention the child helpline number because the kids

might call them. But if a child does call, there must be a reason which cannot be overlooked. Another such instance took place at a school where the principal of a school told me that we could teach the girls, but not the boys because it must not happen to them, which is incorrect. As a matter of fact, it happens to boys more often.

Initially, the schools, orphanages, and other organisations were not supportive, and it was difficult for us to conduct workshops. Some people even said that devoting half an hour to such an event would affect the kids' studies adversely. However, what they fail to understand is that it is unreasonable to expect a child who is being harassed to focus on studies since the kid is in trauma. Since we are an NGO, raising funds for the organisation is another challenge because these workshops are not mandatory anywhere in India, there is no particular curriculum regarding them. There is a lack of awareness regarding the issue everywhere, and the situation is deplorable. I have been to 40 MCD schools, and none of them had a counsellor even though they suggest that children see a psychologist in such a situation.

You mentioned that it is economically strenuous for you to conduct these workshops. So, how do you raise funds?

We have started charging for our workshops at private schools. However, we do not charge at government schools because they can't always afford to pay. Furthermore, we have started training teachers so that they can be employed. Apart from that, we organise fundraising events such as speed jogging, dramas, and musical events.

How can we get kids to speak out about being abused, considering in several cases family members are the culprits?

In fact, in 94.8% of cases, the assault is either by a family member or by a known person. I believe gaining the trust of the children in a workshop is what makes it successful. A kid

will not open up to you unless they trust you.

In our workshops, we ensure that for the first thirty minutes are invested in this, and the children find themselves in a comfortable environment where they can share things. We do not want the workshop to be intimidating for them. I have seen that a lot of other organisations conduct similar workshops in a much scarier fashion. At Our Voix, we teach the kids through cartoons and other activities. It is then that the children can disclose it to us which they couldn't even to their principal or teachers who have been there for about ten to fifteen years. Hence, we try to make a comfortable bond with them involving no restrictions. We allow them to speak up and share and ensure that they will not be blamed for it.

It was recently that a girl told me that she would tell her friends instead of her mother because the latter might blame her. We aim to become these friends to them where they can feel free to share.

Apart from keeping the forum of discussion open between parents and children on this topic, what else can a parent do/observe/look out for to identify that the child is in trouble? Also, what parents can do to educate their kids about sexual harassment?

Parents should start spending time with their children. They should know where their kids are going and should ensure that their child isn't falling into the wrong company by being aware of who the child is communicating with via smartphones. There are also certain warning signs that can be observed. For instance, younger kids might wet their bed or suck their thumb, while the elder ones might develop an eating disorder or they begin to start feeling ashamed about their body. If a child has a bubbly personality, after the assault he/she might stop talking to people and start hating themselves.

It is imperative that the parents teach their children the

correct names of their private parts and not feel hesitant to speak about such issues. Teach your child about safe and unsafe touch. Teach your child that one can be abused without any physical contact too.

Parents can create an environment where even if a child wants to say no to a relative who kisses forcefully or asks them to sit on their lap. They should value children's choices, ask your child what they would like for lunch or give them some responsibility and allow them to make their choices. It is essential that parents talk to their children about everything possible, other than sexual harassment too. It would then give them a comfortable platform to share stuff.



Have you ever come across a case of victim blaming? How does it affect the child's psychology and in what ways do you tackle it?

There have been plenty of such cases. There was once a case in which the girl had disclosed it to us and the principal

claimed that the girl was lying.

There was another very serious case where the girl had been getting raped by her brother for a year. She disclosed it to us and I advised her to share it with her mother. The mother told her, "*Tu bhi toh aisi hai.*" I was completely shocked at how a mother could have said something like this to her child. When we reported the matter the entire family refused to believe it and said that it doesn't happen in our culture and a brother can never do such a thing.

Victim blaming can have a drastic impact on the child. A nine-year-old is too naïve to understand all this, and it would scar her mind forever.

Our Voix also conducts workshops for the corporate sector. While you sensitise them about Child Sexual Abuse, do you also seek any collaborations or avenues for growth for your organisation in lieu of the Corporate Social Responsibility(CSR)? Could you please give us a few insights?

Yes, we are planning to go forward with it. Since we are just a year-old organisation, we couldn't apply for CSR as we required certain documents. Our next step would be to approach companies so that we can get the benefits from CSR. The ultimate goal is to reach out to all the states and not just be confined to Delhi or any particular district. I want to take this knowledge across India, and I think companies can provide a great platform for us.

How can we as a society prevent these instances from occurring?

First and foremost we should be to educate ourselves and not be ignorant about the issue. It is not just happening among the underprivileged but our homes too and possibly everywhere else. Start talking about it and be open about it.

I was once conducting a workshop, and I asked the people to

what sex is and describe it to me. They were incredibly shy about it. Not talking about things enables the abuser to commit such a crime in the first place. The other thing is to stop blaming the victims. If let's say your friend comes and tells you something happened to her, take a stand for her. To speak openly and to not blame are the victims are two of the most vital things one must do to curb these assaults.

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