

The socially-empowered

By Nyla Daud

WHAT do a female traffic warden, a female retired judge of the High Court, a one-time woman head of a public sector television set-up, a female politician, a single mother, a gynecologist, a poetess, and Pakistan's first-ever female senior superintendent of police have in common ... or rather, what would they have to offer to a collective of primary school teachers?

"Their varied experiences as representative of the collective issues that anybody is expected to confront in life. For starters, these teachers at the receiving end would be getting an idea of all that it takes to get to the position of these professionals.

"Additionally, such exposures bring a widening of the thinking process for teachers and make them aware of the fact that social issues have to be woven into contemporary schooling syllabi. The role models we exposed our group of trainees to, brought the message that it is within the ambit of a teacher's official duty to provide a complete educational experience to their wards and that readings from just the prescribed text are not the end of their duty.

"Relying on text alone is going to merely produce literates. When teachers with this sort of a world view go into the classroom, the children under their tutelage will grow up to be in possession of a wider world view."

Moneeza Hashmi's response to the query was simple and straightforward. Managing the seminar in her capacity as communication coordinator for the ongoing Continuous Professional Development programme, being run for primary school teachers in the Punjab, jointly by the Directorate of Staff Development, the Unicef and GTZ, Ms Hashmi's reasoning supports the premise that an educated, socially-empowered woman — in this case the primary school teacher — is the surest bet when it comes to planning for an educated society.

The seminar thus served the purpose of exposing primary school teachers and as a consequence, the children who come under their tutelage, to the many social issues lurking around the corner and for which written text has no allowance.

Judiciously selected for the varied experiences that their respective career choices had armed them for, the guest speakers wove an interesting fabric of social experiences. They talked of how they worked around corners, braved censure, learnt to resolve issues and then finally emerged to make an appearance as role models in a society that routinely works to weaken resolves especially if the protagonist happens to be female. The interesting point was that all the role models called in to address the audience had come at their respective nemeses through processes of trials; a case in point

being the experiences of guest speaker Farah Warraich.

The first ever female news editor in Pakistan, Warraich was also the first woman in her family to come out of her house to work. She got her break when in college a teacher mentioned during class that jobs were available for bright students in a newspaper office.

"When I was offered the chance, a male class fellow stood up to question the sagacity of offering the position to someone who could not guarantee she would get permission to work in that field. I took what he said as a challenge and appeared in the test and interview and got selected. Initially my father was upset that I had not taken him into confidence but now my parents are happy and my in-laws are supportive as well."

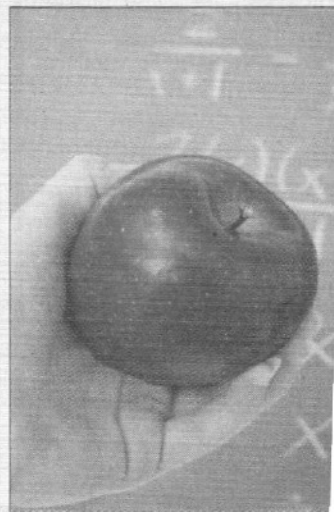
Warraich has been working in the field for 22 years during which she has had to confront the not very positive attitudes of male colleagues and subordinates. "As long as you focus on your work, no one can challenge you."

Traffic warden Nabila Hussain created excitement amongst the audience as she spoke about the liberating experience of being a symbol of empowerment in the public sector. Nabila, who besides her regular duties also lectures at schools creating awareness about traffic rules, brought the message of determination in getting to one's goals.

"I have achieved my dream." She said she was appreciated by a lot of people now and girls often stopped her for an autograph. Much in the same vein was the experience narrated by Zill-i-Huma who now, after having picked up the pieces of life, heads a girl's school.

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recognise yourself and your potential."

Weaving a balance within the landscape of working women as a relatively less-accepted social issue, the success stories were punctuated by somewhat somber references ... Mehnaz Rafi paying accolades to the late politician Zill-i-Huma who was killed by a zealot, poetess Yasmeen Hameed reading out from her poetry the portrayal of women's sensitivities and WAR representative Sidra's advice about speaking out loud and clear in case one's rights were violated.

The ensuing enlightenment brought in by the role models gradually worked towards a discussion between the audience and the speakers ... pointing to

the predicted hypothesis that shared experiences are sure to be evaluated from personal perspectives by listeners. Similarly the DSD seminar also led to concentrated queries about ambitions centering on behaviour changes.

A participant, an education officer, wanted to know to what extent a woman should compromise in life. And how could balance be attained? Responding to the query, Dr Arfa said compromises are of two types: one, of self-respect, and secondly, for self-empowerment.

"You need to stand your ground. There is no compromise on rights, justice and self-respect. She narrated how a former professor and mentor of hers, Principal Muhammad Ali, asked her what she wanted to do and she replied she wanted to be a lecturer. She said: "It was my teacher's encouragement that helped me because he saw I was in search of my identity."

And the search for identity ... a la the social kind, being the subject of the seminar, the participants got the message that in order to resolve conflicts it is personal identity that has to be established ... more so from the perspective of teachers at the primary level because eventually they would be passing on such values to children who in turn would carry the message to society at large — and the end result for sure would be persons armed with a rounded education. ■

