**SOHINI CHAKRABARTI’S INTERVIEW**

Sohini Chakrabarti is the founder of Breaking Barriers, the first school level LGBTQI+ sensitization and awareness campaign.

1. **What gave you the inspiration to start Breaking Barriers?**

I have always been against the idea of division. I despise the concept on two grounds- first, division cannot possibly remain among equals; it necessarily becomes an exclusionary process that marginalizes those who do not represent the mainstream narrative. Second, it is arbitrary, based on no real differences, but social constructs and conditioning. Gender strikes me as a particularly arbitrary form of social division, giving rise to inequalities, that have no real bases. It is, therefore, that at the beginning of High School, I initiated Breaking Barriers, a gay-straight (GSA) of sorts, which has. over the years, much to great delight, taken a more cross-sectional form. This collective was established to spread awareness about variation in gender and sexuality, and normalize 'non-conformity'.

1. **Did you teachers and peers support your idea the first time you brought it up?**

Issues surrounding gender and sexuality, especially issues which arise from ideas of variation and non-conformity within gender and sexuality are considered extremely taboo in society. They remain, unfortunately, absolutely beyond the ambit of conversations and dialogues which are considered appropriate for school settings. I was, therefore, a little apprehensive before I begun or initiated breaking barriers in school. Since we begun in a school like ours, Tagore International School, where one promotes a certain degree of liberal education, I did not expect active backlash or very intense negativity from the student body or the teachers’ community. I did, however, expect a kind of hesitance from everyone and I was correct, as it turned out, in expecting the latter.

It, therefore, became a significant challenge for the Breaking Barriers team to ensure that the issues that we were talking about were taken seriously, were not trivialized and were considered real problems that required attention. Our main aim was to remove the stigma attached to discussions around gender and sexuality and to get conversation and dialogue flowing because it is only those things that can remove prejudice from society, from mindsets and actually be successful in creating safe spaces within our school.

In the last few years, since our inception, it gives me great joy to say that with absolute support from our school administration and no real hindrance created by our student body and teachers’ community, we’ve been able to strengthen the movement in our school and also in different institutions that we’ve been able to reach out to in different parts of the world and have gotten several steps closer to create the desirable safe spaces that we wished to. There is, in fact, a lot of activism going on around queer rights, around non conformity in India and all over the world and not all have been as lucky enough as us to receive the kind of support that we have in terms of those who control the space that we started in: our school administration was extremely supportive and the students were also, if not absolutely in tandem with theories, ideologies that we wanted to promote, were at least open to the ideas that we were trying to spread to them.

1. **Why do you think it’s important that young people like you speak up about social issues such as the issues by the LGBTQI+ community?**

Speaking out and taking action against structural violence and socio economic and cultural injustices in society, it's the responsibility of every citizen of the world. For millennia, those who either do not represent the mainstream narrative or are somehow powerless in front of those who have been traditionally occupying spaces and positions of power have been actively suppressed.

It is our generation, armed with access to knowledge and education as well as ground breaking technology that has the capability to reverse socially and traditionally accepted injustices. It is our responsibility, therefore, to use the powers that we have in a way that we can collectivize and mobilize against all that is wrong in the world.

Young people are the primary stake holders of the planet. Young people are the inheritors of the world we have before us and it is time we take matters into our own hands.

The world is inherently an unequal and an imbalanced place. To go ahead and reverse these imbalances and inequities is a very difficult, mammoth structural task. The first step to achieving that perhaps is to look within and to is to recognize, understand and check our own privileges, because sure it’s important to rise up against injustices that are taking place against you, that are affecting you directly and very actively. But, it’s also important to develop a common consciousness of everyone.

It is also important to understand that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.

It is important to understand that it’s not about actively getting hurt yourself, it is about the kind of negativity which exists in society and which you’re allowing to exist and is actively oppressive towards some. It is only through this common consciousness of young people can we save the planet from its certain end.