

## ROADMAP SERIES: PATHWAY TO INCLUSION: GENDER, DISABILITY AND CREATING EQUITABLE SPACES

**JUNE 4, 2020**

*Kavya Srinivasan has a Masters degree in Development Studies and has worked for a number of renowned non-profit institutions in sectors as diverse as gender, environment and sustainability. She spent two years working in a Bangalore-based NGO that works on employment for Persons with Disabilities during which time she became fluent in sign language. She is now a full-time theatre artist working with children, senior citizens as well as Persons with Disability.*

Kavya started the session by pointing out that this is a good time to be discussing inclusion because the lockdown is both more inclusive and more exclusionary than ever before. It is an interesting paradox especially for those who work in the social sector. She set the tone for the session, saying she would focus on providing actionable tools that participants can take away into their work.

### **Principles of Inclusion**

Kavya defined inclusion as the ability of people to access the things she creates. For example, as a theatre performer, she would want the most number of people to access any new initiative, designer, or writing she is creating. She acknowledged the journey that is inclusion, flagging off the inevitability of mistakes as one becomes more inclusive. She illustrated this by drawing on her own experience at the beginning of her journey.

She set the tone by stressing on the importance of asking questions. You would rather be imperfectly inclusive than not even take the first steps, focusing instead on perfection. The need to ask questions is that much more in unfamiliar situations, perhaps when working with disability, transgender people, communities that you have no information about, etc. For example, when working with disability, sometimes we feel like helping them with something but we need to recognise that they may or may not want/need help. Asking questions helps make inclusion a priority. When leading groups with different kinds of people, Kavya suggested starting by accepting responsibility to promote inclusion. Frequently we do not realise that the people who are excluded do not ask for help, no matter how hard the situation is. It works for any kind of intersectional space like the internet.

### **Including Gender**

1. In spaces like Zoom meetings, Google Meets, and virtual classrooms, the easiest step is to ask for everyone's preferred pronouns to be added to their name. This allows for positive signalling, saying this is a space where everyone is welcomed. Signalling is a concept where one can show somebody from another community that they are welcome in that space.

2. Examples can also be gender neutral. When talking about careers like doctors, lawyers or engineers, Kavya encouraged us to use female pronouns to illustrate that girls can follow these paths too. it.
3. The Rule of Three is a useful group tool as well. If one person is always speaking, they has to wait till three others have spoken before contributing again. Inversely, if someone has not spoken at all, they must participate after listening to three others. This allows facilitators and teachers to assess everyone in the room equally and in spaces where boys often speak more, encourages girls to participate.

Apart from these hands-on tools, Kavya also stressed the importance of amplifying voices where gender is concerned. For example, in some circumstances, if a man pitches an idea, it is accepted more easily than if women pitch an idea. It is important to be aware of such circumstances.

### **Including Disability**

Kavya adopts the UN-approved “person first” approach when speaking of disability. This means that the individual is placed ahead of their disability, identifying as “person with blindness/visual impairment” as opposed to “blind person.” This person-first approach can also involve specifics, choosing to say “engineer with visual impairment,” etc.

The official Indian term that the government uses is “Divyangjan”, and you can find the local equivalent of the word. The English equivalent is “specially-abled”. There are 15 official kinds of disabilities recognised by 2015 Persons with Disability Act.

The truly inclusive way to decide on vocabulary is to ask the person what they prefer. While this is a difficult conversation and can get complicated, it allows for being truly inclusive.

Kavya then focused on specific ways to include people with each category of disability:

#### ***Visual Impairment***

There are some straightforward tools to make online content accessible for people with visual impairment:

- *Audio description*: Asking the audience to try describing a few pictures, Kavya explained the need to describe key features of each picture to make visual cues accessible.
- *Alternative Text*: Alt text is accessed by screen readers to “read” pictures and other visual content, and textually describes what is captured in the pictures.
- In video calls with shared screens, the speaker should verbally describe graphs and pictures for the benefit of visually impaired participants. Slides and other content can also be sent to visually impaired participants early so they are better prepared for sessions.

#### ***Hearing Impairment***

1. Summaries help those with hearing impairment understand the content of the session.
2. Closed captioning, or someone volunteering to type out the highlights of the content in real time, is also a useful tool. When captioning, it is important to use simple English. Many online platforms like YouTube now have an in-built feature to include closed captions, and this should be used by default.

3. Ideally, sign language interpreters should be available for all events, but in cases where this is not feasible, ask attendees if they require this and make arrangements as necessary. Kavya then taught attendees some basic sign language.

### ***Physical Disability***

When working with people with physical disability in physical spaces, once the lockdown is over, the easy way to promote inclusion is to ask what assistance they require. They may not need any assistance or there may be something that can make the space more accessible, like a ramp. Small but effective interventions also go a long way in increasing accessibility.

### ***Learning and Social Disability***

1. Use readable fonts. Avoid Comic Sans and cursive fonts in documents or presentations.
2. Make a large font version of documents available. This can be helpful for people with learning disabilities, people with low vision as well as senior citizens.

### ***Mental health***

With the amount of screen time during lockdown and the isolation that has come with it, it is understandably difficult to show up to everything and always be fully present. It is important to make concessions for this and have allowances in case people do not want to participate, etc. The success of interventions should not be measured on how people are responding online because right now, everybody is overwhelmed all the time.

Check-ins and check-outs are also very useful to be aware of mental health. Ask participants how they are feeling at the start and end of an interaction. It ensures that they are fully connected to you as teachers or educators.

### ***Linguistic Inclusion***

In India, we are surrounded by people who talk different languages. Most of the time, the people we work with do not speak the language that we speak most fluently. Software like Mixlr allow you to audio stream content live for an hour and makes this content accessible in multiple languages. In case this is not available, individuals can narrate the whole webinar in the language needed on demand. In the United Nations, they do live translations for all sessions in languages from around the world.

### ***Question & Answer session***

1. Can you give us a short case story that is related to age-related inclusion?

Kavya and her team were performing a show of 'playback theatre'. It is a community theatre form where they listen to stories from communities and they play them back. In times like this, they have been performing online. It is a space where people were welcomed to talk about things like isolation, needing help, etc. During one show with a mixed demographic, there was a person who did not mute their audio during the performance. Kavya insisted multiple times that audience members switch off their microphone, but with no success. Later she was told that it was an older person who did not know how to use the technology and so, was not sure how to switch off the microphone. From then on, they open all their shows with a demonstration of how to turn the video on and microphone off.