

Teens champion rights of children with disabilities

A student from a private school and a resident of a home for children with intellectual disabilities collaborate to speak up at Inclusive United Nations

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Mahizh Arasi (right) and Shantha seen with a dignitary at Inclusive United Nations conference

Two teenage girls from Chennai have forged a friendship, collaborating to advocate for the rights of children with special needs. Mahizh Arasi, a Class XI student of Good Shepherd Matriculation Higher Secondary School in Nungambakkam, and Shantha, a resident of Sri Arunodayam Charitable Trust (a home for children with intellectual disabilities abandoned by their parents) recently attended a two-day 'Inclusive United Nations' (IN-UN) conference in New Delhi, hosted by PRATYeK and NINE IS MINE, where they gave inputs on what should be included in the post-2030 global development agenda.

Among what Shantha said she wants to see in the world are parents deeply sensitive to the needs of their child who has any form of disability; the right to education should be ensured for all irrespective of their financial status; and absolute absence of gender discrimination. Shantha voiced her views in Tamil. Under the care of the NGO since 2011, the 17-year-old completed Class X from a government school in Kallikuppam and excels in academics and extra-curricular activities.

Sri Arunodayam Home is grateful to Good Shepherd School which brought this opportunity to them and also for empowering Shanta to speak about the challenges faced by children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“We had to bring a student from a challenging background, so Sri Arunodayam was our first choice as we have a long association with it by virtue of the outreach programmes the school runs for its students,” says Sashi Natarajan, vice-principal of Good Shepherd Centenary School who trains students across its institutions for advocacy programmes.

Mahizh got roped in as she has worked with children with special needs including volunteering as a scribe.

For close to six weekends, Mahizh spent considerable time training Shantha how to speak before an audience, helping her understand her rights and working on what should go in the draft recommendations to the United Nations.

“Mahizh would attend online sessions and go to Sri Arunodayam Home to train her so that she could be adequately prepared for the programme,” says Sashi.

The two-day-long event had various rounds of conversations, both of them speaking in Tamil and English. Shantha gave a moving speech about safety and the need for an inclusive environment for children with disabilities. She also showcased her talent by performing in a South Indian group cultural dance.

To build up the representations to be shared, more such meetups would happen. “Every three months the children will continue to be meeting online and adding to the recommendations,” says Sashi.

Children-led initiative

This first-ever INclusive United Nations (IN-U.N) conference is an important step towards drafting the “Global Goals beyond 2030”. Post 2030 Global Goals refers to the new framework that follows the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs), which ends in 2030.

The event brought together more than 3,000 children from 28 States and Union Territories (online and onsite) to broader IN-U.N. activities, shaping recommendations grounded in reality, urgency, and hope, says a press note by PRATYeK.

Far removed from traditional MUN simulations, this IN-U.N. was rights-based, multilingual, inclusive, and born from children’s lived experiences.

Cynthia McCaffrey, UNICEF Representative to India, accompanied by senior leaders from UNICEF’s Communication, Advocacy and Partnerships division were among those who took part, adds the note.

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