

## SAVVY HONOURS

Educationist *Dr Daphne Pillai*

# Enriching Careers, Impacting Lives

Educationist Dr Daphne Pillai shares what it takes to create institutions of lasting pride and build sustainable careers for women.

Dr Daphne Pillai is the Chairperson, Management Board of Mahatma Education Society and Co-Founder of the Pillai Group of Institutions and a leading educationist for over 30 years. She has created new vistas in women's empowerment by initiating and implementing several projects for the upliftment of women, including a literacy drive for women in slums. She is also responsible for many collaborative programs with reputed international universities and organisations.

Excerpts from the interview...

**How did your career as an educationist run its course?**

Coming from a family of educationists, I naturally sought an environment where education would be respected. My father, the late Professor Frank D'Souza, was a committed professor and my husband, Dr K M Vasudevan Pillai, is a committed educator. My mom, the late Cecilia Nazareth e Souza, ensured that we all secured our Masters degrees. But education those

days was not an easy profession to be in. So I found myself wearing two hats - working not just as lecturer in a city college, but also rushing back to Chembur and doubling up as a lecturer in the night junior college, which we had started in addition to our school. I did this for six years while I saw to the needs of my home and my three children. Of course, hard work and sacrifice bring their own rewards, their own fruits, and we grew from a single school into a group with over 48 educational institutions.

**What measures do you take to enhance quality at your institutions?**

Enhancing the quality is yet another priority. With this in mind, we founded the 'MES Research Forum' to encourage budding researchers to present their work and get it peer-reviewed.

Quality building also means exposing our students to international benchmarks in education via ongoing student exchange programs. Year after year, our students are taken to





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the USA where they are exposed to the best of class working practices of Fortune 500 companies.

**What are your views on women’s empowerment?**

We are naturally empowered as we are the child-bearing gender - by virtue of the fact that a woman is the sustainer of the family. We can do both - hold a job and fulfil our family and domestic responsibilities. Why is it that we do not hear of men’s empowerment? You take away the edifice, i.e. the woman, and the power structure will collapse. The point I am making is that the seeds of empowerment lie within ourselves.

They only need the right environment within which to blossom, and it is as much our duty and obligation to choose the right environment for ourselves.

My journey to empowerment started as early as the 1990s when I was doing my doctoral thesis. At that point, English poetry was the bastion of male poets. The focus of my thesis was to show the gender bias in the work of celebrated poets who would be quick to dismiss women as objects of vanity, ignorance and weakness. It became important for me to demolish all traditional concepts of a woman’s role in society.



Dr Daphne Pillai with her husband Dr KM Vasudevan Pillai



**“I am very proud to be part of this consciousness, to rise to its challenges and to know its joys, its rewards.”**

**Tell us about your social service initiatives.**

With a view to community service, I started the Mumbai-Chembur Chapter of Soroptimist International, a women's service organization which enjoys consultation status in the United Nations. One of the first initiatives we put into motion was an 'Adult Literary Drive' that targeted women from the slum areas of Chembur and offered school dropouts the power of a second chance. It meant working with issues of low self-esteem and family resistance. It meant imparting basic, functional skills like banking and financial know-how, budgeting, elementary conversational English and basic social etiquette. This was followed by offering them a host of

vocational opportunities through courses in soft-toy making, beauty care, tailoring etc.

Our greatest joy was not in the recognition that we received internationally, but in these women approaching us and sharing how they were now in a position to make a difference to their family's well-being and to their children's future. And this is one of the greatest strengths of women - to go beyond themselves and transmit their knowledge and energy to others who are not as privileged as themselves. I am very proud to be part of this consciousness, to rise to its challenges and to know its joys, its rewards.

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Photographs Sanjit Sen