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Dalit girls take 1st step towards empowerment

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AHMEDABAD: It was convocation with a difference. For, the 2,138 girls who passed out of **Dalit Shakti Kendra** on Sunday beamed not just with a sense of pride but the knowledge of power to fight the discrimination when they go back to their villages. Decked in chaniya cholis and traditional dresses, they sat through the last day of their three-month **vocational courses** where they were awarded degrees and also prizes for participating in numerous competitions held towards the end of their courses.

"I never thought I could speak in public, forget speaking up for myself. But after spending three months here, I am ready to earn a living, take a stand for my family and fight for my rights," said Dhaval, a student who won three awards, including those for reading and diary writing.

The girls were awarded certificates in the presence of international experts on minority rights. The chief guest, Mallika Sarabhai, exhorted each girl to become a force unto herself and ensure that nobody practises or suffers discrimination.

Founder of Dalit Shakti Kendra Martin Mcwan said his biggest achievement has been to witness empowerment among girls after the course completion. "They may be learning anything from tailoring to beauty course, but what they also learn is to respect themselves, that being a dalit does not make them inferior. In the next 10 years, there will be more than 10,000 girls passing out of this institution."

Past students who have found their feet in the society also shared their experiences. One of them Praveena Purabiya talked about how she had learnt embroidery from her Muslim neighbours but could not get work due to her caste.

Raji Siruka, who did her course in basic computers, now works with a corporate in Mithapur as an operator. "I have learnt that one has to make one's own place in society", said Siruka.

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