

## Sowing the seeds of Feminism through education in rural marginalised adolescent girls in India

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### Abstract

Each society has its own norms and stereotypes as well as expectations which largely guide the process of bringing up children and hence their socialisation. This is targeted towards nurturing accepted persona, social and economic roles in the society. The process of socialization in India is extremely complex with the diversity that marks different contexts and the cultural mores existing across the country. However, the basic core remains the same, bounded by our historical ethos and traditional systems, which have lent a distinct identity to the Indian social system.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Girls education, Adolescent Girls'*

### Introduction

Focused explicitly on women, Feminism is defined as a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that work towards ensuring all rights for women, including their personal rights as well as political, economic and social rights<sup>1</sup>. The thrust of feminism is towards creating equitable opportunities (social, educational and professional) that help women to achieve these rights. In a way, feminism is a movement against gender inequality, especially against women and spells out approaches to address it. The feminist theory refers to constructing viewpoints about sex and gender and particularly focus on being feminine or masculine, reflecting an exemplified and sexually differentiated expression of human beings.

The evolution of feminist viewpoint can be attributed to the west in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, gaining momentum in the seventies. The perspectives related much to the west including issues centered around social, political, legal rights and rights to personal independence, right to abortion, safety and security from violence, including domestic violence, and other types of gender discrimination against women. However, these did not consider the context of women in the other parts of the world.

From the 1990s, the viewpoint was expanded to accommodate the voices of minority women. By this time, feminists argued that it is society that discriminated between men and women. They concluded that the recognized differences amongst men and women are changeable. Thus, gender is a social construct, and can be altered and changed if there is intent and will from

social and political spheres. They claimed that this is the only way to end the subordination of women.

However, there are several perspectives around the social practices that construct gender, how they do so and what kind of impact they bring on each gender. There is yet to be a consensus on one perspective.

In India, the first and second phase of feminism lasted from mid eighteenth century to the Indian independence in the year 1947. It is at this point that Mahatma Gandhi started the powerful Quit India movement, incorporating women's movements within it. This led to the emergence of independent women's organisations. Subsequently, in the post-independence period, the feminist movement started to negotiate for equal treatment of women at home, outside, in professional areas and politics. However, similar to the West, the feminists in India represented the interests and concerns of upper caste women and not of the masses. Over the past decade or so, the focus has shifted to embed feminism in the context of the existing diversity in the Indian social fabric, in order to address culture-specific issues within its patriarchal system and caste-based practices. The regional representation of feminism in India is thus impacted by the country's diversity and plurality.

### Feminism in the Indian context

In line with the understanding that social learning is the main pathway for gender socialisation, in India, family is where a child first goes through the entire process of socialisation. Family is proclaimed to be the most universal and stable institution, the repository and transmitter of values, vital to the

physical, material and psychological well-being of all individuals. The primary role of a family is to give the first set of meaningful experiences to a child, to facilitate social duties and then help the child acquire 'beyond the home education'. These important roles are expected to be undertaken in an environment that is conducive to a child's growth and adaptation into society.

There are two ways in which this socialisation unfolds- firstly, by influencing personality through direct identification and communication, and secondly, by encouraging characteristics of personality by approving and disapproving the child's behaviour.

Each society has its own norms and stereotypes as well as expectations which largely guide the process of bringing up children and hence their socialisation. This is targeted towards nurturing accepted persona, social and economic roles in the society. The process of socialisation in India is extremely complex with the diversity that marks different contexts and the cultural mores existing across the country. However, the basic core remains the same, bounded by our historical ethos and traditional systems, which have lent a distinct identity to the Indian social system.

As Sachdeva (2016) puts it, "the diversity of communities in India render some people to be marginalised and powerless". These are the people who are unable to exercise rights or access any opportunities or resources in their communities. Girls are further marginalised within these sections owing to their sex. The marginalised families follow socialisation practices they have experienced to raise their girls. In addition, the common practice in Indian society is to prefer sons over daughters. The justification for this preference stems from the belief that sons carry the family legacy forward, are the main breadwinners, and are able to look after their families. On the other hand, girls are seen as a burden, requiring dowry to get married and dependent upon their fathers and brothers for economic support and security.

As a part of rearing children, parents tend to apply stricter rules on their daughters, inhibiting their free movement as they grow older and placing restrictions on their autonomy. The main emphasis during childhood in India is not on the encouragement of the child's individuation and autonomy, but a pre-occupation with teaching social and cultural compliance. This is the stance

that is followed and varies across rural or urban context, regions, and in communities. As the child becomes an adolescent exhibiting physical and reproductive maturity, stricter or flexible norms are applied in terms of social standards to either of the sexes. Being an adolescent in Indian society is a very challenging and critical phase in a girl's life.

In rural India, the challenges faced by girls become even more complex as they are not sent to school so they can take care of their younger siblings and/or do household chores, causing them to miss out on learning time and being unable to achieve age and grade competencies. This widens the gender gap in learning, leading to further low accordance to their education. The social hierarchies are even more rigid in rural areas and offer little or no psycho-social support to girls. Married early and entangled in family and pregnancy, most of them get caught in poverty, exhibit poor health, and have restricted development. Denied rights and access to information, they fail to understand their rights and entitlements, and are unable to pursue them.

Feminists have been particularly concerned about the situation of girls in India, and over the past ten years, this has strongly influenced the feminist movement in India demanding equality for women and girls in treatment, opportunities and rights, taking into account the existing diversity in the country. They have identified significant parameters for this empowerment:

- strong sense of self and identity not tied to social norms or stereotypes
- life-skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and empathy to cope with disasters at personal, familial and community level
- language and communication skills to express with confidence and clarity
- professional or vocational skills to be economically independent
- awareness of legal and human rights and ability to make informed decisions.

Furthermore, with the belief that education is a powerful tool that can help to achieve this empowerment, Indian feminists have been demanding for policies and programs to be aligned to this vision, with a clear focus on helping girls and addressing evil social practices,

stereotypes, restrictive attitudes and constraints towards their empowerment.

### **Sowing Seeds of Feminism: Case studies from the Grassroots**

In the context described above, feminism has the potential to be a change maker, empowering girls to build a nuanced understanding of feminism, identifying the issues pertinent to them and applying the solutions to their immediate context. It is not an exaggeration to state that the strategies that work in the most marginalised situations have a significant probability to be successful for women and girls who are situated in less-challenging communities and situations.

This paper describes three case studies of planned interventions, applied in three different marginalised contexts in rural India, that have worked towards sowing the seeds of feminism in the participant girls and facilitating the transition of girls into womanhood within the empowerment perspective.

#### **UDAAN: Flight**

This model particularly builds on those aspects of feminism that focus on the rights to education, to reproductive, political, civil rights and equality for all girls and women. This approach brings in two key components together. The first is a strong accelerated education intervention for those girls who have been out of school due to social, pedagogic and systemic barriers. The second is the integration of life skills in the education intervention, through a social learning curriculum.

The model was first initiated in 1999 in the remote area of Hardoi district in the state of Uttar Pradesh, known for its dismal developmental indicators on maternal and infant mortality and female literacy. The low educational participation of girls in the district was linked to the parents /society's perceptions of low economic returns of education, as there were limited employment opportunities available in the environment and thus the cost of education was considered high, especially when there were low gains envisaged. Involvement of girls in domestic chores and household responsibilities was another cause of their low participation in education and in poor awareness of their rights. Coupled with this problem was the parents' perception of the low quality and relevance of education. Another issue was related to the lack of access to an adequate number of middle/upper

primary and secondary schools. As the parents did not see any forward linkages of primary schooling, they did not even send their girls to primary schools.

Safety and violence against girls and women was another barrier. Girls would not be enrolled if they had to travel long distance, and if the parents did not know/trust the teacher or if there was no woman teacher. Other barriers included schools having inadequate infrastructure, lacking sanitary facilities, having poor quality of teaching, teacher absenteeism etc.

Udaan was thus conceptualised as an approach to provide quality education to those girls who could not access education in time, and who were facing issues of gender inequity and exclusion in their communities. The objectives of Udaan as a bridge strategy were aligned to bring in change at the social, systemic and agency levels, to break barriers, to create an enabling environment and to support girls to complete their primary education. As Ranganathan points out, "Udaan was targeted to develop independent and critical thinking, analytical skills, and a spirit of inquiry, to provide girls with relevant information, skills and attitudes that would enable them to deal with the world from a position of strength".

In this endeavour, Udaan applied two key theoretical/ ideational positions: Social learning Theory<sup>3</sup> to negotiate gender stereotypes and acquisition of values, and ii. Rousseau's idea of learning through experience. Using the main idea of the social learning theory, Udaan created a difference in the thinking, behaviour and attitudes of girls by providing varied non-stereotypical and equitable experiences and models that challenge girls' subjugation in society.

Udaan used Rousseau's ideas in the delivery of the pedagogical content. The chief supposition supports the use of our senses to gain knowledge and learn. Discarding the use of books, Udaan used the concept of nature and our own body/senses as instruments for knowledge creation.

#### **The Udaan experience**

The initiation and eventual setting up of 'Udaan' rested on a strong community interface involving their mobilisation and support for educating their girls. Once their support and trust was received, the camp enrolled around 100 girls from the

most marginalised communities in a residential camp for 11 months.

Away from the responsibilities of home, this group of girls lived together, participated in educational and social processes, and got an opportunity to share, discuss their issues and understand their lives better- in many ways a place for catharsis for most of them. Learning to live together gave them an opportunity to negotiate their identities and understand the different ways of addressing their issues, moving beyond biases and inequalities. The enabling environment of the camp promoted non-stereotypical and non-alienation centric experiences for the girls.

The thrust of the Udaan experience was on building the agency of the girls with respect to their identity and learning. The principles underlying the identity construction process included: considering every person to be equal and having a right to be involved in all activities, irrespective of gender, caste, creed and culture; addressing inequities and gender stereotypes that the girls face, fostering identity building in a fear-free environment to practice non-stereotypical behaviour; implant an "I can do it" approach to have faith in oneself so that the girls believe that it is possible for "all to learn" even if the pace of learning may be different.

The principles on which the learning experiences of the girls were visualised considered the following: individual attention as most important in addressing the differences in the pace of learning; use of the local medium of language in learning, increasing the complexity in tasks over a period of time; using different techniques to foster learning; making learning meaningful by relating it to one's context and following a sequential and general progression approach.

The early literacy and basics of primary education were considered as the foundation for grounding feminism in the marginalised girls. In this context, the objective for a 11 month Udaan programme was to enable the school drop-outs or never enrolled girls to complete their primary education (grade 1 to 5) through an accelerated learning program.

The curriculum for language, mathematics and environmental science was in sync with the state curriculum. The structure included meticulous planning of weekly and session plans, with respect to time allocation to various curricular

objectives, general progression in learning, horizontal linkages across subjects and flexibility. It was integrated with co-curricular activities including sports, cultural activities to work on life skills and on breaking gender stereotypes.

Activity-based pedagogy was followed, creating situations for the girls to learn, arouse their curiosity, help them experience the joy of creating and playing and relate the content to their context. The activities included playing mathematical games, creating a story, song, singing, discussing, reading a story etc. The teacher's role was that of choosing and introducing the task, helping the girls with the activity and to reflect in order to enable learning, abstraction, linkages with other aspects of curriculum.

The life skills component, including a set of skills, was specifically implemented by providing opportunities for experience and enlarging girls' world view. This was done through the Social Learning Package (life skills curriculum), especially designed to orient girls towards their rights and responsibilities and to provide them opportunities and space to understand their issues and look for solutions together. The larger aim focused on providing an external and larger view of the world to the girls, support them to pitch their context within this world and seek to fulfill their rights and responsibilities by taking action. The curriculum focused on the skills around self-awareness, learning, citizenship, and employability, looking to nurture self-esteem, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, conflict resolution, resilience, negotiation, and decision making. The idea is to support girls to use these skills to identify their own problems and issues as well as those that their communities are facing, and to look for solutions together. The onus is not only on girls to solve these problems, but also on identify supporters and others who can do so. This was done in a joyful and interesting manner by establishing various platforms in a safe and enabling environment such as girls cabinets, food & nutrition committees, sports, cultural activities, arts and drama and a specific allocated 'My time' for their informal discussions.

The process of providing the experience critically rested on the educators/mentors who were from the local community itself to best understand and handle the real situation and

challenges that the girls faced. They resided with the girls for the entire period of the intervention and were duly incentivised for the enormous challenge of empowering the girls who belonged to the most discriminated communities. Therefore, the capacity building of the educators was the most essential ingredient in their own empowerment and involved strengthening/building their personal, professional, and social competencies. This essentially built on the principles of feminism that are aimed at addressing equity issues for the disempowered girls that they worked with.

The process entailed a rigorous pre-intervention training program of a month's duration, followed by short-term support programs spread over the entire year. These programs supported improving teaching learning processes, strengthening teachers' capacity in subject teaching and in facilitating life-skills based pedagogy, developing sensitivity in teachers around respecting the girls' context, identity, their lived experiences and applying this understanding to nurture skills. The knowledge of what to teach, how to teach and when to teach was very important for the educators to understand and follow in their curriculum transaction process. A critical part of their work involved enabling the girls to garner support from their respective families and community, even in the face of conflict and resistance.

Learning was continuously tracked by teachers through the assessment indicators developed to evaluate cognitive and non-cognitive skills such as girls' attitudes, their changing beliefs and practices.

For the girls from the rural marginalised and discriminated communities, the Udaan experience brought in significant information and awareness for the first time in their lives. This included having the right to information, understanding diversity, gender and sexuality, experiencing the principles of equity and justice in some small ways at least, and building a positive sense of self. In addition, skills around critical thinking, problem solving, communication, resilience, negotiation were nurtured so that they could take action for themselves and in their communities. All this was a part of their training in psychosocial empowerment.

Ultimately, what was seen was that the girls were able to apply life skills in their real contexts and use their voice.

### **Evidence of success**

Over the years, evidence generated clearly showed that the Udaan girls were more confident, could negotiate with their parents, took decisions about their lives and had communication skills. These supported many of the Udaan alumni to seek a more productive life for themselves.

Ranganathan (2005) showed that Udaan succeeded in promoting psychosocial empowerment in various ways<sup>4</sup>- "A comparison of Udaan girls with their non-schooled age-mates and girls undergoing formal schooling, all from the same villages on the dimensions of their sense of self and personal identity and their construction of gender identity, showed that Udaan girls had a more holistic sense of self and identity and were able to combine societal expectations with personal wishes to spell out their ambitions, aspirations and goals. They also wanted to contribute to the village community. They had hope for a better future".

The study also showed "a very striking feature which figured only for them was their ability to transcend the desire to be 'good girls' in terms of a societal definition of the idea. Their self and identity were thus based on dimensions of personal satisfaction and personal meaningfulness, rather than experiences external to them, or desired by others for them".

*Farzana, a 2002 pass out, takes pride in taking decisions at home. Her mother seems pleasantly surprised, and that is vivid in her narration, "my dear daughter, you must not forget the education given in Udaan. It will be of tremendous use for you in your life."*

Udaan has not been very revolutionary, but it has attempted to address the girls within their own societal setting, wherein they can get better lives for themselves. This involved creating facilitative structures that helped to reduce their age of marriage, age of becoming mothers and shedding other evils such as dowry etc. Many Udaan girls have been able to negotiate with their parents and delayed their marriage at least till the completion of their higher education. In many ways, the Udaan experience is as an effort towards gender empowerment.

*An unimaginable achievement for Pinki, who is now a graduate, has been negotiating with her parents to delay her marriage plans. She wants to contribute to the income of her family and takes pride in her capacities to do so.*

Pinki expresses how hesitant she was when she had joined Udaan.

*“I did only household chores and did not know how to talk to others, cycle etc. After Udaan I went back to my village and completed my schooling from a government school. I decided to pursue graduation and then want to do my masters and be a teacher”.*

Kalpana class VIII confidently says,

*“I will go by what my parents say about my marriage, but I will question my bridegroom as well as to what he does and what are his thoughts about our life together. I will also challenge any dowry that is asked by my would-be-in-laws.”*

One of the achievements of Udaan has been that the graduates have been encouraging their siblings and other girls in the village to join Udaan. They have become the ambassadors of Udaan in their own village. Sudha, who passed out in 2002, used to feel too shy to talk to people but not anymore. She says, *“I love to study here. Here teachers are more sensitive and friendly. I coaxed my father to send my older sister to go to school. My mother supported Prema to join school.”*

Ruhana has been getting other girls to join Udaan. She, in many ways has been a role model for them as she is now pursuing her graduation.

*“I was too old when I started to study and have still gained a lot, but smaller children should start studying now and will be benefitted much more.”*

Babli, Class VIII, got inspired by other Udaan graduates. Sandhya has 5 sisters, and her mother does not keep too well, due to which she had not studied earlier. However, looking at the Udaan graduates, her mother got inspired and sent her to school. She thinks she can now take care of her mother better by using the education that she has been given.

Gender equity in Udaan has been addressed through providing opportunities to the girls to perform non-stereotypical roles or those which were supposedly “masculine” roles and

responsibilities, for example, cycling, talking to shopkeepers, going out to buy grocery, going to open bank accounts, going to post office etc.

Farzana continues,

*“I love to cycle and move by myself. I loved to participate in a 10 days survey and mapped Hardoi and other places. I remember visits to bank. I was earlier shy to go to shop and whatever he gave back, my mother used to say you never check what is given to you. Now I can negotiate and bargain to fix prices.”.*

Some girls have even negotiated a space for themselves after marriage. Poonam, who is pursuing graduation, continued studies even after marriage and now teaches in a non-formal school programme in her village.

### **Power within: Adolescent girls’ Groups (Kishori Samooh)**

A Global Campaign called ‘The Power Within’, best understood as a leadership initiative, was started in remote and extremely poor communities in the State of Uttar Pradesh in 2009. The goal of the campaign was to empower adolescent girls (10-14 years) by nurturing leadership skills in them. These leadership skills comprised of a set of attitudes and competencies, that had the potential to enable girls and young women to lead more informed, pro-active and empowered lives in their personal, social and community contexts. The communities experienced caste-based discrimination within which the girls were the most discriminated. Many girls were either never enrolled or dropouts, considered a liability and were ready to be married. A few who were participating in education were potential dropouts and showed poor attendance and learning. Issues of security and mobility were most prominent for them.

‘Power Within’ provided the space to integrate leadership as part of the empowerment initiative for girls. The objective of the intervention was to cultivate leadership skills in the girls, while ensuring that they access and complete primary education. The premise on which the program was built clearly articulated the feminist approach to empowerment.

Two platforms to foster these skills were the ‘in-school’ and ‘out of school’ environment. Various forums in-school were established to cultivate these skills, wherein the mode or tools used were the curriculum, activities inside and outside the

classroom and children's committees. It was assumed that the skills that the children cultivate will be useful for them to live a fulfilling life, to make use of the available opportunities in their environment and to contribute to the society by making it a better place to live.

The intervention primarily used a Grounded theory approach, instead of one single theory, adapted to the Indian context and ground realities. The theoretical premise which guided the approach is the work of Bass (1990)<sup>5</sup> on nurturing leaders:

Existing personality traits: assuming there are girls with natural leadership traits, opportunities were provided to them where these traits come to the fore.

Situational personality traits: those which come to fore due to a crisis, calamity or an event that needs leadership. In a situation of crisis, girls were encouraged to step into leadership roles. These may revolve around raising pertinent issues, taking civic actions etc.

Learnt personality traits: the transformational journey helps girls to inculcate leadership skills. Girls were motivated to take on leadership roles and then provided opportunities to do so.

The Behaviourist approach was used to achieve the theoretical premise. This approach shows that socio-cultural conditioning shapes our behaviour and personality. Thus, acceptable conditioning, reinforcing, and modelling lead to cultivating leadership skills. This is reinforced through trainings, discussions and providing opportunities to girls both in-school as well as out-of-school.

The grounded theory approach recognises three preconditions for rural girls to cultivate leadership skills and build positive feminism.

- Empowerment reflected as high self-esteem and positive psychological changes
- Need for space and opportunities to exercise empowerment
- Expression of voice and resistance to a person or aspects that impacts negatively on personality

The five major traits pursued as leadership development in girls were confidence, assertion of voice, decision making, organisation and vision.

- Confidence was contextually defined as the ability to express oneself without hesitation, analyse one's strengths and weaknesses, participate actively in family and peer group contexts, and be able to go to friends' houses and the market area without any escort.
- Voice was defined as the ability to express one's opinions with their underlying rationales, ask questions in the community and peer group meetings and to be able to facilitate discussion on a given theme in a peer group context.
- Organisation refers to being better informed about self, local issues and significant others, the ability to collect and collate information, manage one's schedule and time to incorporate all pursuits and activities and to be able to plan and conduct small group activities.
- Vision was contextually understood as the ability to formulate a simple life plan with short term goals for oneself. The capacity to motivate group members to take up collective action and be able to guide one's siblings and younger peers.

These traits were fostered through activities within the school, outside the school and in the community. The underlying idea was to create cross linkages in order to build leadership.

### **Contextual curriculum with a view to inculcate leadership skills**

The curriculum was specifically developed to respond to the context, the challenges and the needs of the girls to nurture their personality development positively. Only identifying the content is not enough, therefore, the curriculum also focused on how to transact this content to strengthen learning. In this respect, the aim was also to strengthen capacities of teachers to deliver this empowering content in an inclusive and joyful manner. The goal was to particularly focus on developing leadership skills in girls. A number of factors that were taken into consideration included creating a safe and free environment and spaces for girls to interact, share and discuss their issues; providing a world view to enlarge their thinking and experiences; orient them on rights as well as the responsibilities expected of every citizen, empathy towards fellow beings. Thereafter supporting them to critically think about the issues that concern them individually or in their communities and how in their own way they can contribute to address them. That they needed to

work with all in their immediate environment, family, communities and significant others was impressed upon. The strategy was to bring about a change in the thinking of girls and to support them to be powerful in taking decisions and action about their lives.

Sachdeva (2012) very highlights the role of platforms in nurturing personality- “Morning assembly, an activity carried out in most schools, is generally ritualistically organised. As a part of leadership education, it was used as a whole group planned activity of thirty minutes, involving activities like reading the newspaper, bringing in stories from home, reciting poems, asking riddles, sharing interesting experiences by children from all communities”.

Further, the importance of this platform is recognised by Sachdeva (2015) to “foster a fearless school environment, while providing opportunities to children to learn from one another, develop confidence and a sense of achievement, enabling them to overcome their hesitation and inhibitions in order to perform in front of an audience. Teachers facilitated but also participated in the assembly, gradually melting away barriers between them and the students, by being friendly, expressive and informal”. Girls were provided ample opportunities to participate, raise issues and even discuss solutions to some extent, given an opportunity for creative expression and developing self-confidence.

The leadership skills were also addressed through the co-curricular activities that are normally integrated as part of the morning assembly. In addition, the participation of girls in sports, especially football and cricket was encouraged, with a hope to break gender stereotypes and establish some lived experiences of equity.

Beyond school, yet linked to the entire process, was the forum created at the Community level, wherein girls groups called ‘Kishori Samoohs’ were formed. These were networks of girls who could have been in-school or out of school, with the objective to provide them a space in the community and facilitate those opportunities and events that foster leadership skills. This was a very important component of the leadership strategy. There were around 25-30 girls in each group, facilitated normally by a female adult, but with a clear view of grooming one or more girls to take on the facilitation responsibility in the

future. This forum followed a strategically defined process, wherein the girls were provided a space to discuss their issues as well as the issues of their communities, were made aware of their rights and responsibilities and were prompted to look for solutions to their own problems as well as to those of the community, in a joint manner, including civic action like environment, water, cleanliness etc. .

The frequency of these forums to meet was flexible, varying from once a week to once in a month for 3-4 hours, depending upon the convenience of the members and the situations that they lived in.

Added to this were the community seminars (structured meeting/interaction with the community at regular intervals-monthly/quarterly), wherein the importance of education and relevance of leadership efforts in girls were discussed along with the issues that emerged from adolescent girls groups. The intention was to build community support, ownership and sensitivity to the issues of girls and get the community to address certain negative or rigid prevailing norms in the society.

Similar interactions and open sessions with boys and a targeted strategy to get them involved in the cause of girls, especially to challenge the rigid cultural norms and stereotypes that prevailed in their homes as well as in society, were also planned and conducted.

### **Evidence of success**

The initiative was implemented in 245 villages/ model cluster schools of Bahraich and Balrampur, two of the lowest performing districts in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India, as per the Human Development Indicators. A total of 245 Girls’ groups (Kishori Samooh) were constituted, one per village, with over 6000 girls being members. At the end of two years, 56% of the groups had started functioning actively, with 25 percent out of these being extremely active and vibrant. Separate interactions outside the school were held with over 1000 boys through organised interactions. In-school intervention reached 18000 children in grade 4 and 5 (8436 Girls, 8306 Boys).

Visible changes were witnessed in school towards girls, in the girls themselves, and even in the communities that they live in, attributable to the initiative.



Rashida Bano, Head Teacher, Badholi Primary school of Jarwal block notes,

*“the most important change in my school that I witness is the increase in participation of girls in sports. We teachers always thought that the girls cannot play games like cricket and football. But now our perception has changed and even we are playing cricket and footballs with girls”.*

The girls are enjoying participating in non-stereotypical games for the first time in their lives.

Gulapsa, 15 year old, member of Rapti Kishori Samooh, Village- Sisai, District-Balrampur, proudly shared,

*“We learnt playing cricket and even were able to defeat boys one time)*

Important changes were observed in "Sohani Balai", one of the committees, in which children managed food distribution. They cleaned the sitting place, made sitting arrangements and then guided the distribution of the food. The students also started asking each other about their committee's function and waited for their turn to handle the same. It was also found that all children worked together for the assembly, food and cleanliness committees. The most striking change was in the boys who also started talking about their roles in household chores such as cleaning. Members of the students' committee, including boys, started washing their school uniforms on their own. Girl's involvement in the committee helped them in learning organisation, system, team management, coordination, and ownership building. (Case study by Ranganathan N, 2011)

Currently, girls do not face any kind of resistance from their respective families or from the immediate community to join a girls' collective or to participate in its activities. In the male dominated social context of U.P, it indicates that now there is a general acceptance of seeing girls in non-traditional and non-stereotyped roles. Most girls admitted that they usually share their intimate feelings and personal matters either with peer group members in girls' collectives or with their mothers. (Ranganathan N, 2011)

Slowly and steadily, girls started getting attracted to the small but sure spaces that they had been able to get for themselves in their communities. From a meagre 8-10 girls getting together in the initial phase, the membership has grown to

30-35, comprising not only of school-going girls, but also attracting those who are out of school. When asked the reasons behind joining these groups, most felt that it seemed like this is their 'own' space, where they were able to shed their inhibitions and share their views on various issues including the sensitive ones.

Many of those who were out-of-school got inspired and motivated to go back to school seeing their peers in the group, determined to make a better life for themselves.

Brijmala, a 14-year-old, member of Nanhi Kirane Kishori Samooh, Village Gaura Pipra, Block –Mihinpurwa, District Bahraich, UP, shared that:

*“Now I have also started thinking about myself. I have to study and became something in my life”.*

Ujjama, 13-year-old member of Indira Kishori Samooh, Village- Badholi, block- Jarwal, District- Bahraich stated,

*“I have gone back to school and I am happy”.*

Sonu 12-year-old, member of Indira Gandhi Kishori Samooh of Nautalwa viilage of Mahsi block of Bahraich district reflects,

*“Earlier I was not able to express myself in front of anyone but now I can communicate clearly”.*

Re-enrolment and new enrolment of school drop-outs and non- school going girls was possible due to the negotiation efforts of the girls' collectives. There were many non- school attending girls who joined or re-joined the school. They are continuing with their studies till date.

Girls also got exposure to the outside world when they ventured out of the village and visited various institutions, such as a bank and a post office. The quality and active participation, enthusiasm, and high confidence levels of children indicated that the girls' collectives as a forum were able to generate a high amount of enthusiasm among the girls for demonstrating their skills and talents in public. It also showed their involvement and interest in extracurricular activities. (Ranganathan N, 2011)

Active Participation in extra-curricular activities and public performances was visible when girls' groups showcased and demonstrated their special talents and skills through a wide range of activities, such as plays, recitations, songs, solo acts, jokes and puzzles.

In the Kishori Samooh meetings, the upper caste girls used to treat the girls from the marginalised social groups with utter disdain. The social mixing in the activities undertaken by girls' collectives enabled them to educate and sensitise upper caste girls to listen to the views of the lower caste girls with respect. The large presence of girls in the girls' collectives and their regular participation in its activities put some kind of social pressures on the parents of the members of girls' collectives to redefine and refine the existing roles of girls. (Ranganathan N, 2011)

Many of the girls have even raised their voices against discriminatory practices that they encountered either in their families or in the society at large.

Improved social awareness was visible in most girls as they became fairly conscious of the ill effects of early marriage and were ready to put up a fight on this issue with their elders, although some non-school going girls (15-16 years) were under tremendous pressure from their families to get married. It is extremely difficult to support less skillful girls to resist their early marriage without any external support. The girls' collectives enabled them at least to initiate a dialogue and discussion with their parents on this issue. All school-going girls expressed their interest in completing their school level education before getting married.

Of equal significance are the striking changes in the thinking and support for the cause of girls, in the community, with many getting gender-sensitised.

When the girls became aware of the new provision of free education, introduced in the Right to Education (RTE) bill<sup>6</sup>, they confronted the teachers at the Schools in Gaisara blocks who were charging admission fees from the students and forced them to return the money to the girls who had already submitted their fees. Because of the girls' protests, the teachers had to return not only their money but also return the fees of the entire class.

The girls in Tishar village recently had an opportunity to meet the education officials in their schools and were bold enough to ask them for any assistance that they could provide for their girls' collectives

Shabbir Ahmad Mansoori, a 63-year-old resident of Gaura Pipra village of Mihinpurwa block of Bahraich district, notes:

“Initially boys escorted their sister for Kishori samooh meetings but now girls go alone. This is not a very small change”.

Another remarkable change was noticed when a 12 year old girl was supposed to get married in Shivpura village, but due to the efforts of the members of the girls' collective of that village who convinced the girl's parents, the wedding was postponed. In another case, the members of girls' collective assisted a minor girl in getting her *Gauna* ceremony cancelled and the parents were convinced to negotiate with her in-laws. The girl later took admission in a school. The girls' collective convinced the parents of a girl (of 13 years) of Arrai village in Jarval to join class 1. She never attended school before, though her younger siblings were attending senior classes. Also, some of the girls in the village have got their age reduced to get admission in the classes desired.

The girls of Devravan village attended a session with the ANM on the medicines needed for women's health and hygiene. During the session, some girls who earlier could not dare to utter a single word before inquired about stipulated entitlements under the National Rural Health Mission and demanded services as per the scheme for them. (Ranganathan N, 2011)

Some of the groups started to raise the issues of their communities with those who can help in resolving them.

Karimunnisha, 38-years-old, Pradhan Sisai village of Balrampur district, shared,

*“We have not seen girls to interacting outsiders in this village but after formation of Kishori Samooh drastic changes reflected on girl's attitude, they came to my place and asked me to provide Panchayat Bhavan for their monthly meeting”.*

Arvind, a 32-year-old, mentor of Indira Gandhi Kishori Samooh of Nautala village of Mahsi block of Bahraich district, shared,

*“Girls are now able to express themselves more confidently, earlier they don't talk everyone but now they are going to Village head's home to make demands”.*

Conclusively, CARE India's leadership model, its experiences and approaches to girls' empowerment by developing key leadership competencies targeting girls (and boys) between the ages of 10-14yrs, and within that addressing

the needs of younger and older girls separately, without following a blanket approach for all, was recognised as a powerful approach.

The program emerged as a strong gender transformative approach for girls' education and leadership development, especially in the context of India where girls' grow up with entrenched stereotypes which are very difficult to break. The example also shows ways to understand how to address the issues of gender equity and exclusion in our communities, by providing an extra element in the education of girls and through an integrated approach. It clearly contributed to the process of sowing the seeds of feminism in the minds of the girls who came from deprived communities.

It also narrated an actual experience on how to address the cause of girls in the most marginalised communities so that they are better equipped to help themselves to get a secure future, participate and take decisions and improve their life opportunities. India's scenario being complex in terms of caste, class, tribal divides, provides a rich insight into the possible strategies that could be adopted in such a situation.

### **Adolescent Girls Learning Centres (AGLC)**

This model was implemented in the most backward district of Kutch situated in the state of Gujarat. Kutch, with 70 percent of its population residing in rural areas, is vulnerable to disaster and shortage of water resources. Due to the lack of viable employment opportunities, there exists widespread poverty in this region, which poses a special challenge to the development indicators of children, especially girls belonging to marginalised communities, specifically with respect to girls' rights to education, health and equality.

Considering that feminism promotes equality in access to all rights, and that education is not just a right but also a means to promote the philosophy of feminism, it becomes critical in a region like Kutch, where the parents did not allow educational access to their daughters due to socio-cultural customs and beliefs factors. Early marriages, traditional domestic work relegated to girls, traditional role of the son as care-taker of parents, tradition of girls getting married and leaving their parental home- all acted as barriers to girls' education. In addition, there were also caste barriers. Socio- economic

hardships also compelled the parents to involve their girls in taking care of their siblings. There was the entrenched tradition that denied girls an education and kept them from contributing economically to their families and to their country. Thus, many girls dropped out around the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

In Kutch, girls were growing up with deep-rooted stereotypes which were very difficult to break. The issue of marriage was real for them and inhibited their education. It was more of an inhibitor for them than for the boys. This was particularly true for families living below the poverty line and communities that had to migrate in search of work. Children's participation in work – both within the household and outside – was another barrier to participation. Low attendance and seasonal absenteeism prevailed. In the case of girls, the burden of work before and after school was a major deterrent to effective participation. While there has been a significant increase in participation in primary education, inadequate coverage of upper-primary, middle and high schools (it is well known that on an average the ratio of primary to middle and high school is roughly 3:2:1) and non-availability of schools within the walking distance remained a major issue. Similarly, in the absence of backward and forward linkages in the form of pre-school education and post-primary education, the effectiveness of primary education went down. Overall, the problem was one of accessibility, quality, and relevance of education.

Adolescent Learning Centres (AGLC) were thus conceptualised to address the needs of the girls in these communities, especially that of education and economic productivity.

Intensive community mobilisation in all villages, supported the establishment of AGLC in every village. It helped to break the stereotypes and beliefs that existed in the community about education being irrelevant for girls. Massive campaigns, Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities, mass rallies, street plays, group discussions and interpersonal communications spread awareness about the importance of education and helped in convincing communities to send their adolescent girls to AGLC. Regular home visits, involving key stakeholders such as the village head, religious leaders, school head; sharing the learning progress of the adolescents; the monthly mother- teacher association (Matru Mandal)

meetings supported in building the community as the biggest asset of the AGLCs and the illiterate mothers as the champions for their girls education and empowerment.

Keeping in mind the challenges of the formal education system and the diverse needs of adolescent girls, a flexible approach to provide basic literacy, life skills and avenues for economic productivity were linked in this intervention that was targeted towards the never-enrolled or drop-out adolescent girls.

The intervention particularly focused on peer interaction and a space to connect, justifying the appropriateness of its local name ‘Bal Sakhi Kendra’ (children’s friendship centre), where girls were provided basic literacy, and had a peer-based forum to come together, interact, share problems, nurture their relationships and reclaim the joys of their lost childhood. This was the first step in sowing the seeds of feminism, where girls started to understand what they have been missing with respect to other gender and communities and how they were being discriminated against. The approach overtly as well as covertly addressed various forms of empowerment for girls.

The three-pronged strategy towards empowerment focused on transacting and building three kind of skills-learning, life skills and employability, with the purpose to package an entire approach aimed at reducing vulnerability and supporting girls in becoming empowered. In this way, this intervention differs from the other two with its added focus on the employability skills.

Flexible and contextualised learning opportunities were organised at a pace, time and place convenient to the girls. This was important for the girls involved in family chores and economic responsibilities to attend as per their convenience. The timings varied from afternoon to evening, in discussion with the community, and in the space provided by the community itself, thereby taking community and family into confidence and garnering support. As looking after younger siblings was a major responsibility for most of the girls, they were allowed to bring their siblings to school, where they were involved in play activities while the girls studied.

The course was packaged as an accelerated curriculum, transacted for three hours every day, covering four grades within a period of 2 to 3

years. Pedagogy involved group methodology, peer learning, individual competency based and joyful activities, wherein each girl was taken to the next level only after they acquiring what was expected of them, and not according to the time required to achieve it. Literacy and numeracy were focused for basic literacy.

Classroom transactions used mother tongue (Kachcchi language) and slowly transitioned to Gujarati, the state’s official language. Gujarati was taught for language proficiency, using an approach of moving from simple recognition and writing of alphabets to complex processes of reading and writing simple sentences with comprehension, with a thrust on building expression of their opinions and thoughts in vocal or written form. This is where the thinking process around feminist issues was put in motion. Numeracy, being of utmost importance in their daily life and as a path for economic empowerment, was integrated strongly into the curriculum. This involved building capacities to engage in simple mathematical calculations to basics of transactions and how to apply numerical skills in their daily life, using a prominent game called “*Businesswoman*”. No formal examination was held, but a year-end simple assessment was conducted to move the students to the next level of learning.

Gender stereotypes were addressed in the social learning curriculum, with support given to girls to turn into confident individuals, take their own decisions, solve problems and become conscious of their social responsibilities. The emphasis was on the exploration of the self and its interdependence with society. It covered various themes like the relevance of education, status of women, understanding of local resources, understanding community and civic awareness, utility of public services and institutions, cleanliness, understanding diversity, and analysing social issues. The themes were continuously supported through action-oriented participatory projects which helped girls in perceiving, noting and discussing important happenings in their communities, building and narrating stories of change, newspaper-reading and exposure visits to important places and services in their communities such as the post office, bank, credit services etc. Exposure Visits for experiential learning and exploring the larger world helped in knowledge generation, understanding the educational and employability

opportunities available outside their communities, and made them more confident to have a voice. The curriculum also focused on key adolescent issues such as health and personal hygiene, reproductive health and laws relating to women.

Several platforms used to build life skills were sports and games, wherein the girls could participate in badminton, volleyball, along with indoor games, speech, arts, drama, singing, dancing and other creative activities. The centres provided space and opportunity to pursue creative activities which were either considered to be a taboo or were not facilitated in the home environment. They used this approach to build the agency of girls, especially their voice, confidence, creativity and conflict resolution skills. Teaching the girls to ride bicycles, a male privilege, had a major role to play in breaking gender norms, and supporting their safe mobility.

The AGLC intervention had a strong integration with the employability skills and it had a focus on nurturing and strengthening those local and indigenous crafts that have a tremendous market potential in the state, country and even outside of India. While many girls knew the basic art, they had never used it for commercial purposes. This was structured and transacted meticulously based on the orders that were brought in by local NGOs who liaised with the market vendors. The approach was built on delivering quality, adhering to strict demands and specifications expected from the product, and thus involved teaching craft meeting commercial standards, ethics of work and business. Numeracy skills were applied to negotiate and understand profit and loss. The approach helped the girls to understand issues around equality in wages and ethics of work, in line with the feminist perspective. In many ways, this component linked well with learning and life skills, and became an entry point and a motivator to participate in education, gain life skills and opened avenues for employability, other than the home chores or agriculture.

In addition to the craft, linkages were made with the existing government-run employability schemes, such as kite-making that fetched girls a modest stipend during training period and a skill to employ to generate income. Sewing, a much-expressed demand from the community was also encouraged to support households and market needs.

The AGLC rested on an all-women fleet of local, passionate, and dedicated teachers who became role models for adolescent girls. Being from the same villages, the compromised educational qualification of grade 7<sup>th</sup> was supplemented with pre-intervention week-long intensive training, followed by subsequent follow up trainings and onsite support. The content of the trainings was based on the accelerated curriculum, life skills, teaching methodology and their modification to suit each child, individual pupil assessment. In addition, support involved community interface, motivating parents to send adolescent girls to AGLCs and girls who do not regularly attend to be a friend and a guide to the adolescent girls.

### **Evidence of success**

The intervention led to perspective building among the adolescent girls on issues of significance to their lives. The discussions and debates about their social conditions, their status in a family and other social groups supported their critical thinking skills and reasoning abilities. Their changed aspirations with the learning of new skills reflected decision-making and goal-setting. They also understood the importance of learning and the value of social skills in nurturing positive relationships with all. The opportunity to sing, dance and debate developed communication and self-expression skills in them.

The opportunities to interact with people from different spheres helped the girls in overcoming shyness and developing their interpersonal skills. A platform to spend quality time with their peers helped them in enhancing their relationships. Emotional skills, including self-reflection, enabled the girls to understand values, goals, strengths and weaknesses. The enhancement of knowledge and skills led to an increased self-confidence. Their physical appearance and cleanliness levels improved. In some cases, the ability to contribute to the family income increased their value in the family. All these changes in their lives contributed to better self-image and self-esteem among the girls. Skills like cycle riding and playing non stereotypical sports broke their notions of stereotypical gender roles and made them more aware of their strengths.

The knowledge of basic literacy, enhancement of life skills, skill building for livelihood options, awareness about the society and ability to

analyse their own status developed the inherent leader hidden within these young girls.

Many girls started expressing their opinions in their family matters, taking initiatives to explore their dreams, contributing to the improvement of family economy, which was previously unimaginable in the patriarchal society.

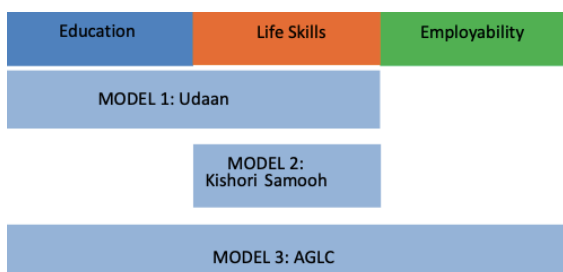
*“Earlier I was unable to express my opinions, but now if there is a quarrel in the family, I am able to express my views with logic in front of my parents & siblings.”* Julekha, Kharai AGLC

*Amita Ben, an AGLC teacher remembers Daksha’s evolution from a shy girl with no voice to an empowered girl who has taken the decision of not only completing her education after dropping out in class 3, but also making a living for herself by employing the vocational skill of sewing that she learnt in the AGLC. This journey has transformed her life by delaying her marriage and converting her into a productive member of her family by becoming an entrepreneur. She is gainfully employing her math skills to stitching clothes as they help her in taking measurements; and she is looking forward to repaying a loan of Rupees three thousand that she had taken to buy the sewing machine.*

The intervention was able to exhibit clear signs of feminism in several girls who displayed high levels of self-confidence and visible signs of leadership. They showed voice assertion, the capacity to display resistance, and had a clear view on most aspects of society like gender, governance, development etc. They also showed boldness and potential to hold office in local governance (Panchayati Raj Institutions), where women can be represented.

### Conclusion

The case studies captured above present three different models implemented in three diverse locations in India, in the most marginalised rural communities. The illustration below shows the focus of each of these models:



The goal of the first model Udaan was to provide formal education to out-of-school adolescent girls. This was done through a specially designed accelerated curriculum, which compacted five years of primary education into a one-year programme, offered as a residential programme. At the end of this programme, girls could pass the class 5 exam of the formal school system and then transit to regular mainstream schools for the remaining part of their education. In the year spent there, efforts were also made to empower them by expanding their understanding about societal issues through a social learning curriculum and develop in them some elements of leadership by giving them different duties and responsibilities in the camp. Issues related to patriarchy, gender stereotypes and social practices which required re-thinking, were all discussed in the quest to develop a voice and agency in the girls. During their stay at Udaan, girls are seen to exhibit a strong sense of self and identity and envision personally and professionally successful lives for themselves, as made evident by the Evaluation Studies carried out in these areas.

Follow up studies of the Udaan programme showed that almost all the girls continued their education and some from the early batches in Hardoi even completed their graduation. However, the Scoping Study (2016) conducted with Udaan alumni at Hardoi presents a rather bleak picture of their life post Udaan. The study reveals that despite better educational status only 28.75% among them were engaged directly in income generating activities, while 71.25% were unemployed. Among those employed, 60.87% were involved in agricultural activities, and 30.43% in precarious jobs of tailoring and embroidery. Few others were engaged in seasonal work with unstable income. Moving on to the world of work or even bringing about social change in their villages was not easy for them. The skills acquired in Udaan were useful, but a different skillset and training was required for the adult years. For instance, skills of communication in the local language and English, soft skills in ICT, economic and legal literacy and how to conduct oneself in professional settings, among others, became important to know. They had been touched very peripherally in the Udaan curriculum.

This calls for a serious deliberation upon the need for a sustained focus on the empowerment of girls and women from a feminist perspective.

The second model focused on empowerment in the form of leadership training, through setting up girls' collectives in backward villages. The idea was to develop voice, agency, and resistance abilities in them, so that they could become change-makers in their communities. The programme was once again guided by concerns of equity and enabling girls to take on leadership roles to fight restrictive community beliefs and practices and replace them with more gender-just attitudes.

In the third model AGLC (Adolescent Girls Learning Centres), learning centres were set up for out-of-school adolescent girls in remote village habitations. These operated for three hours a day, wherein the girls were taught basic language and mathematics skills for functional literacy. Topics related to health, hygiene, nutrition, cleanliness, preservation of the environment, understanding public services (hospitals, banks, post offices), conserving natural resources like water, were also discussed through a Social Learning Curriculum. An important component of the programme was integrating employability skills of local craft (embroidery), as a move towards linkages with the market. Collaboration was done with local NGOs working in the sector of handicrafts, who brought orders for the girls and paid them for their labour. It was felt that this would then become an institutionalised process and empower the girls for life. However, after the exit of program, the girls could not negotiate and sustain orders with the NGOs and handicrafts collectives on their own. They did not have the requisite skills for this.

As validated by the evaluation studies of these programs, what was common to all of them were clear benefits while they were in process, but not enough long-term benefits in terms of preparing the young adult women for the job market and for entrepreneurial or leadership opportunities.

The three models reflect concerted efforts to sow the seeds of feminism in the girls who have participated in these programs. However, these efforts further need to be sustained and institutionalised at the three levels of agency, structure, and systems to have equitable societies.

## **Positioning Women's Empowerment in a Theory of Change**

The analysis of some select powerful case studies in India confirms that a deliberate attempt has now been initiated to sow the seeds of feminism, even in the most marginalised communities. The target population is girls and women, and the enablers are the family, boys, and men. It has been understood that while education is a powerful tool to open the world of knowledge to girls, enhance their awareness on rights and responsibilities; education alone, legitimised through schooling, cannot ensure that the sprouts of feminism will be sustained for long time. The demonstrable positive changes in behaviour, attitudes and thinking are best sustained if, in addition to education, psychosocial empowerment is also targeted. A distinct sense of self and social identity achieved through psychosocial empowerment leads to significant long-term gains. It enables women and girls to apply what they have learnt, impact significant family decisions and community-change initiatives.

However, as the community continues to be resistant of threats to its power structures within their local context, especially with respect to gender equity and social justice, they need to be consistently and continuously challenged, and negotiated with. This is where the feminism perspectives in girls and women become important.

The case studies have also shown that their intervention approach rests on the assumption that education, with gender equity and social justice as its integral components, will empower the girls and improve their life chances and options. Gender equity and social justice support changes in attitude and facilitate reconstruction. However, it is only when the interventions support transition from girlhood to womanhood, factoring in what empowerment means in adulthood, that the girls will be able to use the principles of feminism to foster equitable societies.

In light of the above discussion and aforementioned parameters of an empowered woman, the existing approach to establish feminist approach in rural communities of India will not hold strong for long. For empowerment, which is growing and sustainable over a period of time, a new theory of change is required

which provides long-lasting solutions to problems and adequate scaffolding periodically to enable women to become fully empowered and become agents of social change. The new theory of change needs to be envisaged that not only helps women find a voice, but also creates a ripple effect, which further helps other women in similar situations.

This approach holds the vision of encouraging and promoting the empowerment of women belonging to backward and marginalised

communities in economic, social, legal and political spheres, which can give rise to greater gender equality, equity and social justice. Designed along a developmental perspective, the approach envisions helping in sustainable capacity building, leadership, and life-skills development. Through the convergence of various dimensions, the approach will be able to promote the psychosocial development of girls and women by fostering a strong sense of self and identity.

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