



# COLLECTIVIZING GIRLS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: KEY FINDINGS FROM EXPLORATORY RESEARCH IN INDIA

## COLLECTIVIZING: A STRATEGY FOR ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA

With a new goal to end early and child marriage (ECM) now adopted within the broader United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the international development field is focusing an unprecedented level of attention and resources on tackling this practice around the globe. Among the key components of effective ECM interventions is the creation of safe spaces for girls, and collectivizing girls has emerged as a strategy for establishing these safe spaces. AJWS defines “collectivizing” as regularly bringing groups of people together to learn about shared challenges and take action toward common, long-term goals.

In India—a country with a strong history of autonomous, feminist community organizing—some feminist organizations have launched girls’ collectives as a strategy for empowering adolescent girls as agents of social change. These collectives create spaces where girls can explore their identities in a broader political context and develop the knowledge and skills needed to negotiate for greater choice and opportunity in their lives and communities. While research has established an understanding of what safe spaces, self-help groups and collectives have achieved for women, little is known about the potential of collectivizing younger girls. In response, AJWS commissioned an exploratory study on girls’ collectives and their impact on gender inequality and ECM.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In 2014, AJWS commissioned two feminist education experts in India, **Dipta Bhog** and **Disha Mullick**, to study the nature of collectivizing adolescent girls in that country. They collected data through interviews with experts; interviews and focus groups with staff from community organizations working with collectives of women, girls and youth in different regions; and a national meeting with practitioners in the field of collectivizing to discuss their opinions and experiences.

## KEY FINDINGS

### COMPONENTS OF GIRLS’ COLLECTIVES IN INDIA

- Most adolescent girls first engage with collective spaces for practical reasons. For example, organizations offer English and computer classes that attract girls into collectives. These practical programs are widely accepted by communities seeking social and economic mobility for their children, which makes it easier for organizations to gain trust and involve girls in the process of social change.
- Adolescent girls in India often face significant restrictions on their mobility. Collectives provide girls with a critical space for moving into the public sphere and interacting with peers—and the negotiating power that comes with having many peers to advocate with them for greater freedom.
- The process of collectivizing in India involves first addressing girls’ practical needs, then supporting them to pursue their interests and goals and to advance social change. Transformative change takes place when girls can identify the power structures in their communities and work to influence those structures, so that they can create opportunities for themselves. Examples include girls’ collectives undertaking public campaigns to stop sexual harassment and to improve public toilets for women and girls.
- Given the transitory nature of the adolescent age group, effective girls’ collectives must support new members to enter and enable older members to take on new roles and responsibilities. This requires significant attention to developing and formalizing the structure of the collective.

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**AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE (AJWS)** is the world’s leading Jewish organization working to end poverty and realize human rights in the developing world. Since 2014, AJWS has provided more than \$5 million to local organizations working to end early and child marriage in India. This initiative emerged from AJWS’s 15 years of experience funding and learning from social change organizations in the country.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' COLLECTIVES

- Women's collectives often provide the foundation upon which organizations can build girls' collectives, as the women can intervene with gatekeepers in the community and mitigate the risks girls take when they begin moving into the public space. The women's collectives also offer girls' collectives a model of how to enact social change, giving concrete shape to the ways in which women's shifting identities and actions can advance gender equality.
- Organizations working with women's collectives draw on what they've learned working with women in order to engage with adolescent girls, seeing women and girls as part of a continuum of shared experience. In this way, the collectives are a mechanism for intergenerational solidarity, emotional support and transfer of knowledge.
- Although there are many synergies between women's and girls' collectives, the interests or outcomes that girls envision for themselves are not always consistent with the priorities of women's collectives. For example, some girls in collectives have advocated for including boys in their activities, a decision that some of the women in collectives disapprove of.

## EDUCATION AND COLLECTIVES

- Some organizations attract girls to collectives through schools. These programs have the advantage of being able to access large groups of girls, but face significant restrictions on how they can engage with them. For example, critical issues such as sexuality are difficult to raise in formal educational settings.
- Other organizations collectivize girls outside of the formal education system, through programs like remedial classes—which organizations promote to families as additions to the formal school curriculum—or residential camps for girls in rural areas.
- Organizations report that girls use the education, skills and increased agency gained through collectives to confront their families about the restrictions that girls face, including early marriage.

## SEXUALITY AND COLLECTIVES

- Sexuality, relationships and puberty are central to the lives of adolescents, but also serve as a source of anxiety for both communities and the government. Girls are often reluctant to voice concerns related to their bodies due to fear or shame. Girls' collectives provide one of the only spaces where discussions and sharing on these topics can take place among peers.
- Some organizations facilitate these conversations by including curricula on gender issues, anatomy and reproductive health, harassment, domestic violence, sexuality and relationships. This develops girls' confidence, provides them tools to negotiate in relationships, and encourages them to speak out against harassment in school and to resist early marriage.
- Societal taboos regarding sexuality limit the ability and willingness of some organizations to engage with adolescent girls on the issue. Some organizations are willing to discuss sexuality only within the collectives, not publicly, because they fear losing the community's trust—particularly given that the adolescent girls are under age 18 and still minors under the law. This fear also means organizations rarely intervene in the home when a girl faces trouble resulting from romantic and/or sexual relationships, including situations where families arrange marriages as a means of protecting a girl's perceived honor.

## EARLY AND CHILD MARRIAGE AND COLLECTIVES

- Rather than directly discouraging early marriage, most collectives support and encourage girls to dream of new opportunities and different life trajectories by pursuing education. Conversations within collectives often focus on enabling girls to discuss how marriage or the potential of marriage affects their lives.
- Married young women are the most disempowered group of adolescent girls. It is often difficult for organizations to include married young women in adolescent girls' collectives because they must meet other demands on their time from husbands and in-laws.

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**LEARN MORE** about AJWS's research on early and child marriage at [ajws.org/earlymarriage](http://ajws.org/earlymarriage) or by contacting Jacqueline Hart, Ph.D., AJWS's Vice President for Strategic Learning, Research and Evaluation, at [jhart@ajws.org](mailto:jhart@ajws.org).