

COLLECTIVIZING GIRLS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: STRATEGIES FROM INDIA

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SECTION
01

GIRLS IN THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE: AN OVERVIEW

Introduction

Collectivizing refers to the bringing together of members of marginalized groups in ways that enable them to articulate their oppression and strategize for individual and social change. In its various forms (self-help groups, cooperatives, women's *sangathans*, trade unions, and so on) it is regarded as an important strategy for realizing the rights of marginalized people around the world (Ramachandran and Jandhyala, 2012; Steady, 2006). Collective action on women's rights became a powerful means for political and social transformation for women in 1980s India.

Because of its perceived potential in addressing the root causes of early and child marriage in India, the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) commissioned this study to examine how several community-based organizations in India were using collectivizing as a strategy to work with and empower adolescents, including in efforts to address early and child marriage in India.

AJWS approaches early and child marriage as an issue with broad root causes (poverty, the compulsory nature of marriage, anxiety over girls' sexuality and patriarchal control that denies girls agency) which must be addressed to empower girls and young women toward greater self-determination. Collectivizing girls – or mobilizing girls into groups in safe spaces where they can strategize to maximize their life choices – can be an important strategy in addressing the root causes of early and child marriage, by enabling girls to negotiate for greater self-determination.

However, despite the spotlight in the global development discourse on girls' empowerment, there appears to be little known about the specific experience of collectivizing girls and young women for their rights.

In this light, AJWS commissioned the authors to undertake an exploratory study that looked at the nature of

strategies to collectivize girls among selected community-based organizations in India, the role of collectivizing in challenging social norms, the challenges and benefits of collectivizing girls and if and how collectivizing girls can be seen as a strategy to increase girls' agency, access to public life and influence their aspirations.

The research began with a desk review of policy documents on adolescent girls as well as literature on collectivizing women, both in India and in other countries. The conceptual framework for the research drew on feminist experiences of collective action over the past decades and recent work on youth and girlhood studies. That framework and the desk review findings shaped the questions for the collection of primary data. The authors then undertook primary research involving in depth interviews with 27 staff officers from seven community-based organizations (in varying geographical locations) that mobilized women, girls and youth, and focus group discussions with a total of 80 women leaders in grassroots collectives, 105 girls and 9 key informants. A national meeting was also organized to bring together NGO practitioners working with youth, girls' and women's collectives for a range of opinions and experiences.

Based on both the desk review and primary research, this report gives an evidence-based perspective on the evolution of working with adolescent girls in India and the continuing challenges and potential of collectivizing girls as a strategy for social change.

Instrumentality of girls in development and policy documents

The term "adolescent girl" brings together two distinct categories – the "girl child", which is informed by a discourse related to gender, equality, development and rights, and the "adolescent", which is located in a cognitive, human developmental framework that marks important physical, cultural and social transitions that a young person makes in this phase of growing up. These discourses have framed the needs, strategies and analysis of outcomes related to adolescent girls.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

The World Conference on Education for All in 1990 declared "improving access to quality education for girls and women as the most urgent priority" (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990). In a speech in 1992, the World Bank vice president emphasized that the cycle of female deprivation could only be broken by

investing in girls' primary education (Summers, 1994). The "girl child" became the target group to map the success of governments in achieving gender parity.

With the Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) focus on universalizing access to schooling, there was need for a flagship program focusing on girls' access and participation in education that would bring together United Nations agencies and other national and international bodies working on the MDGs. With the launch of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative in 2000, the rationale for girls' education became closely tied to the notions of investment and benefits that continue to determine the manner in which the category of "adolescent girl child" is constructed. As secondary education became the new frontier, development policy and programming, especially over the past five years, increasingly focused on girls, especially adolescent girls. Adolescent girls are now at the heart of programs on education, health and livelihoods and seen as significant catalysts for social change and transformation.

A working paper by the World Bank (Chabaan and Cunningham, 2011) from data collected in 14 countries across Asia, Africa and South America, detailed the nature of dividends when girls are invested into – in terms of their education, their health and the delay of marriage. It described "inactivity" and "joblessness" among adolescent girls as lost wages and lost opportunities. Targeted programs that bring girls into school, the report argued, could drastically increase opportunities. The figures highlighted the stark economic gains to be made when "600 million" of a so far unproductive population of adolescent girls is empowered to take a healthy and productive role in society.

A statement released by the director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2011 declared adolescent girls to be the "unexpected solution to the world's most pressing problems" and explained how investing in adolescent girls results in wider benefits: "When she is educated, healthy and skilled, she will be an active citizen in her community. She will become a mother when she is ready and will invest in her future children's health and education. She will be the entrepreneur discovering solutions that break the cycle of poverty, one girl at a time" (UNFPA, 2011). This outlook framed UNFPA's strategic plan for 2013–2017, labeled "Action for Adolescent Girls". The plan broadly aims to "protect adolescent girls' rights, in particular delay age at marriage and childbearing, and empower the most marginalized girls" (UNFPA, 2014, p.1).

Beyond international development policy, initiatives like the Nike Foundation-sponsored Girl Effect “movement” positions girls as “agents of change”, into whom a minimal interest and investment will reap considerable returns. For example, “By delaying child marriage and early birth for one million girls, Bangladesh could potentially add \$69 billion to the national income over these girls’ lifetimes.”¹ “Less than two cents of every development dollar goes to programs specifically for adolescent girls, but they are the key to breaking the cycle of poverty,” rationalizes the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, a joint initiative of the United Nations Foundation and Nike Foundation, to bring fresh resources and perspectives into programs focused on girls.²

Research reports published by agencies spanning the World Bank and the International Council for Research on Women provide numbers and voices that corroborate the rationale for focus on adolescent girls. One interesting example is *Girls Speak*, one in the *Girls Count* series of reports published by the Coalition for Adolescent Girls. In *Girls Speak*, adolescent girls “speak” to the policy priorities and strategies in place to empower them. Not surprisingly, they strongly agree with the perspective that investing in their education, livelihoods and freedom to delay marriage will be transformative to their lives. The report positions itself as providing an integrated perspective, taking into account all the relevant factors in their environment. “Girls say: Give us the choice to put off marriage and childbearing until we decide that we are ready. I don’t want to be like another girl I know who is 13 years old and already pregnant. I just want to get a job of my own and help my parents, who looked after me when I was young” (Green, Cardinal and Goldstein-Seigel, 2010, p. xxii). These girls’-eye perspectives are a persuasive, neat fit into the global discourse and advocacy around the aspirations and needs of adolescent girls as beneficiaries of programs and interventions.

INDIA’S POLICY CONTEXT

Beginning with the New Education Policy in 1992, a diversity of strategies among education initiatives engaged with adult women. By the mid-1990s, the emphasis moved from women to girls with the launching of the District Primary Education Program and eventually the national Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All Mission) in 2001. In 2000, youth began to appear as a prominent group across sectors – health, sports, women and child development and human resources, connecting to the international discourse on adolescents. India at that time was slated to become the world’s youngest population, with an average age of 29 years, and this was the

demographic dividend that would enable India’s increased economic growth. The National Youth Policy, 2015–2020 (Government of India, 2014) builds on this idea and uses the language of investing in the productivity of youth, focusing on education, entrepreneurship and skill building as well as healthy youth to achieve greater gross domestic product value. But it is largely gender blind, with young women treated as a marginal category. Drawing on previous discourses, it reflects the classic gender divide, with boys targeted for skills and livelihood development and girls referenced in terms of their reproductive role (Government of India, 2014).

For instance, the Ministry of Women and Child Development’s Sabla scheme for empowering girls aged 11–18 stated, “Adolescence represents a window of opportunity to prepare for healthy adult life.... The adolescent girls...need to be looked at not just in terms of their own needs as adolescent girls but also as individuals who can be productive members of the society” (Government of India, 2010, p. 2). The scheme is meant to provide inputs and resources for young girls in selected districts, ranging from nutrition to reproductive health counseling, as well as vocational training and leadership building through the formation and strengthening of girls’ collective at the village level. Although the Sabla scheme holds potential as an empowering program, its focus on health (especially sexual and reproductive health) and nutrition is far greater than the inputs on accessing public spaces and entitlements or the vocational training inputs. Additionally, the definition of “productive” in the context of adolescent girls is telling: “The module developed for training [adolescent girls] will include issues pertaining to home maintenance, budgeting, saving, running the household, gender sensitivity, schooling of children, etc. [Adolescent girls] will be advised on these issues to orient them to become more productive members of society” (Government of India, 2010).

Indian development agencies, bridging the role of advocates and funders, seem to pull on the neoliberal narrative of investment and benefits when constructing the needs and focus of programs on youth and young girls. Social and economic potential, imminent risk and a focus on building the aspirations of young girls echo through these programs. *Owning Her Future*, a report that advocates for investing in empowering adolescent girls in the Indian context and provides a glimpse into some organizations operating in India, makes the point that “100 billion dollars” could be added to India’s gross domestic product over the lifetime of adolescent girls if they had the opportunity to stay in school and delay

1 See www.girleffect.org.

2 See <http://coalitionforadolescentgirls.org>.

early marriage and pregnancy. “Adolescence is the last chance for interventions that would continue to have a positive impact through subsequent life stages” (Dasra, 2012).

Thus, the burden of ensuring appropriate reproduction and control over fertility that was placed on women in the 1980s (Sen and Grown, 1988) had shifted to adolescent girls 20 years later.

The missing link between women’s collectives and girl’s collectives

Internationally and nationally, the women’s movement brought the issue of gender equality and women’s status to center stage across sectors. They provided important conceptual frameworks through which subordination and empowerment can be understood and worked upon. But policy documents that speak of empowering girls do not always acknowledge and build on the gains made by social movements, especially the women’s movements.

Gender equality in development or international policy on adolescent girls has emerged as a concept separated from movements for women’s rights. There has also been a shift from a concern with the present (responding to the immediate needs of girls and young women) to what is “harvestable” in the future, or mapping future benefits of investments.

This is a limitation of targeted work with girls in a way that either focuses on cost-benefits or sees girls as mere tools in a process of economic or social change. The shift in language also points to the significant shift in context to one dictated by the economic paradigm and the dictates of public and private global capital. It renders adolescent girls across the developing world as vulnerable, where their voices come to merely reiterate the development benefits sought by state and international agencies.

Much of the focus in the literature on social movements and development in Africa, Asia and Latin America is on documentation of experiences of mobilizing and organizing of women. Two important historical processes – that of resisting colonization (in the global South) and that of the struggle for women’s suffrage, or the right to vote – have been triggers for the organizing of women in many parts of the world. Specific histories and regional circumstances have

determined the nature of this organizing, and the outcome sought from the collective formation of women. Using the context of Africa and collective action by women, Steady (2006, p. 17) argued, “The gendered nature of collective action is complex, fluid and influenced by historical events, materialist conditions, international forces and corporate globalization.”

At the same time, the relationship between the women’s collective and the girls is complex. Women’s groups have an important role in helping girls’ groups to grow and girls to grow within those groups. However, there are tensions and gender interests (outcomes) that women envisage for girls that are not always in consonance with how adolescent girls view their own priorities. Kabeer (2013, p. 2) highlighted the role that feminist collective action has had in “helping translate rights into capabilities in some contexts and capabilities into rights in others”. But, she added, rights also depend on capabilities and only become fulfilled if the capabilities exist to exercise them. She argued that for poor and marginalized groups, both men and women, it will be the strengthening of their collective capabilities through processes that “emphasize the shared and structural nature of injustice that will serve to politicize the capabilities agenda” (Kabeer, 2013, p. 6).

There exists rich documentation in the Indian context that looks at the roles of individuals and collectives in transforming and challenging institutions of power and control and that impact women’s status (Gandhi and Shah, 1992; Kumar, 1993; Batliwala and Gurumurthy, 2012). But policy documents that speak of empowering girls do not always acknowledge or build on the gains made by social movements, especially the women’s movements.

Kumar’s *History of Doing*, for example, traced the women’s movement in India and its link with larger movements for economic and political rights, while giving face to individual women who had a crucial contribution in these movements (Kumar, 1993). Since the 1990s, there has been interest in looking at changing the formation of women’s collectives, from state-run programs like Mahila Samakhya to self-help groups³ and the significance that the changing nature of these collectives has (Batliwala and Gurumurthy, 2012). For example, many identity-based women’s collectives bring tribal women, Dalit women or Muslim women to engage with both their communities and the State to demand

3 Mahila Samakhya is a program for women’s empowerment through education implemented in 1989, in the wake of the 1986 National Policy on Education, which recognized education as an “agent of basic change in the status of women”. Through *sakhis*, or village-level change agents, and structures called Mahila Sanghas, or women’s collectives, the program aimed to give women an opportunity to plan and monitor their own learning needs.

their rights (social-cultural) and their entitlements (legal and governance related).⁴ Large federations of women's collectives have emerged through programs like the Mahila Samakhya and have involved a partnership between the State and feminist groups to collectivize poor rural women as a strategy to impact women's engagement with both development and rights (Ramachandran and Jandhyala, 2012).

"Mahila Samakhya viewed *sanghas* (collectives) as the means of countering powerlessness; *sanghas* were the instruments that would enable women to plan, implement and direct their own empowerment. The role of the outsider was to facilitate the coming together of women, allowing them the 'time and space' to determine the direction and pace of social change..." (Jandhyala, 2012, p. 107).

A large-scale initiative to form collectives of rural women by the State also took off in the mid-1990s, in partnership with banks, microfinance institutions, international development and fiscal institutions. It was the self-help group phenomenon, which unfolded on a national scale to address poverty alleviation by making credit available to women for both consumption needs and entrepreneurship. Ninety percent of the self-help groups were solely women's groups. The collective of women in self-help groups was a forum through which individual women could pool their savings; it was qualitatively different from the collectives, or *sanghas*, that represented groups of women struggling for justice, equity and entitlements.

The self-help group model has been criticized, however, for its focus only on economic (and not social) empowerment, "where gender equality is then cast as a business case and managed by deploying poor women...as untapped social and economic entrepreneurs who can raise household incomes and purchasing power, improve health and education status, and accelerate economic growth" (Batliwala and Gurusurthy, 2012, p. 439).

In comparison, there is a relatively smaller body of work documenting the organizing and mobilizing of youth (young women and girls in particular), with emphasis on the value in feminist methods of collective action. Batsleer's work (2013) documented the work with girls movement in the United Kingdom and its practice of youth and community work with girls over the past decade, with shifts in context and severe backlash. In an interesting parallel to the current policy

discourses, Batsleer talked of the shift from seeing girls as a focus of philanthropy to being "people with potential". Batsleer outlined the core curriculum used in organizing work with young girls and women as strongly rooted in feminist pedagogies: "identifying power and inequalities in our lives; challenging all discrimination and oppression at every level; esteem [and] confidence building; developing political awareness; anti-sexism; learning to support each other".

She also added that all collective work with girls does not necessarily challenge their subordinate position, and it's not the methods but the aim with which this work is done that determines the outcomes. Useful in Batsleer's perspective is the refusal to separate work on the autonomy of young people (to empower them) while also understanding that "empowerment is personal and structural". Additionally, a deeper understanding of the community that young women are embedded in is crucial to enabling them to negotiate through their lives. "It is within this tension between 'what is within our grasp' and 'what remains outside our power' that much of the creative work with girls and young women occurs..." (Batsleer, 2013).

Key concepts framing collectivizing with youth and girls

The conceptual framework for the study brought together concepts that have informed political and development work with women – gender and empowerment – as well as concepts linked specifically to youth. The questions used for the field research were based on these concepts: Where do adolescent girls' interests figure in the world of data and statistics? What are the practical here-and-now needs of this group and what are the strategic needs? Subsequently, why collectivize girls? If unity and collective action is being imagined for this group, defined by its fluid and not yet binding identifications of age, class, caste, sexuality, region and religion, then what are the structural challenges that are specific to this group?

Empowerment and practical and strategic interests

An important debate that has emerged centers on the question of what are women's interests. This question has been critical to not just understanding political movements that women were part of but also social policies that were built around assumptions related to their interests. Molyneux (1985) challenged the standardised formulation of 'women's interests', pointing to women's unequal status

⁴ Dalit refers to groups marginalized by the Hindu caste system and subjected historically to untouchability and systematic discrimination.

being mediated through different structures like class and race, and also varying in form across regions and time. She categorised gender interests (so potentially for men as well) into practical and strategic interests. Practical interests are located in the concrete, material conditions that women find themselves – in their roles as mothers, wives or as workers. Practical interests, in her view, did not necessarily challenge gender-based inequities, while women's strategic interests do. Strategic interests are derived from an understanding of the reasons for women's secondary status and therefore address structures and practices that are at the core of women's subordination. Molyneux also pointed out that it is not an either/or situation between practical and strategic interests. "Indeed it is the politicization of these practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests that women can identify with and support which constitutes a central aspect of feminist political practice" (Molyneux, 1985, p. 234).

The idea of practical and strategic interests holds value in terms of the content and strategies of mobilizing adolescent girls on issues. More importantly, it highlights the need for not just short-term but long-term visions regarding the processes of seeking gender equality through collectivizing.

Another idea is empowerment, which has propelled work with women at the grass-roots level and has informed the approach with which policies (both national and international) commit to ensure development for poor, marginalized women. With changing global and local contexts of funding and design of empowerment programs for women, this concept is seen to have become depoliticized over the past decade. The question that emerges in the context of adolescent girls is, given that girls are lower in the hierarchy to adult women in the family and community, what would a transformative empowerment agenda mean for them and how different is this from women's concerns?

Tied to the concept of empowerment and the transformative idea of social change is the concern with integrating gender issues in different institutions, which is a stated outcome in development programs across the world. If and when gender mainstreaming takes place on issues related to adolescent girls, what are the issues that emerge in relation to the community, family and State for them as a constituency pushing for recognition and a voice, while at the same time being tied closely to their identity as daughters?

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Developing the idea of *risikogesellschaft*, or risk society, in the global electronic economy, Ulrich Beck argued that

the failure of modern social institutions to control the risks that they have created (environmental and nuclear) has had a profound impact on the constant attempt in post-industrial societies to avoid risk. This has permeated the nature of social reproduction, intimate relations and politics (Elliot, 2002). In the context of youth studies, researchers have looked at the tensions that emerge from the choices available to young people and the reality of their circumstances and structures that they have little control over.

A new set of risks and opportunities emerge as young people move away from the traditional occupations of their parents and communities, particularly in the context of universalization of elementary education and the push toward completion of secondary education (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). The research thus also asked: What are the nature of risks and opportunities that emerge for adolescent girls as they struggle to move away from domestic labor, access schooling and delay marriage? These shifts increase the years of dependency on their families, given the delay in entering the wage economy or then exaggerate concerns regarding their sexuality and give rise to new methods of control being exercised by families.

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

For young people from marginalized communities, the creation of networks and associations or collectives provides them with the possibility of constructing new identities, leveraging access or building ties that generate claims to new power structures. The value attached to one's social ties – in the form of durable networks, social ties and the structure of relations – is key to understanding the workings of social capital.

A typology used to understand social capital is "bonding" or "bridging"; the first is where links and networks within the family and community are drawn upon and bridging is where links with different groups are made. This idea of bonding and bridging capital is of particular importance in terms of gender because crossing boundaries of class, caste or being the "only one" comes with a cost in terms of moving away from resources existing through the family and community. "For [young women], severe tensions exist between expectations of relationships and high educational and occupational aspirations" (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 25).

Social and cultural capital is tied to economic capital. To understand or to build the resources that are available to young people to make choices or bring about changes

requires an understanding of both the material and non-material resources available to them.

Research on adolescents has attempted to develop a holistic understanding of their world by charting out the domains of interaction. The framework (figure 2.1) developed by Henderson et al. (2007) to track the journeys of young people toward adulthood over a decade, through their reflections on their hopes, fears and priorities over different points in time, marks out the domains where adult identities are developed and processed. For Henderson et al., these domains encompass work, education, domestic life and leisure. And hence, organizations' strategies to work with young people target one or some of these domains. Each of these intersects with dimensions of autonomy and adulthood through the self, relationships, practices and citizenship (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 29).

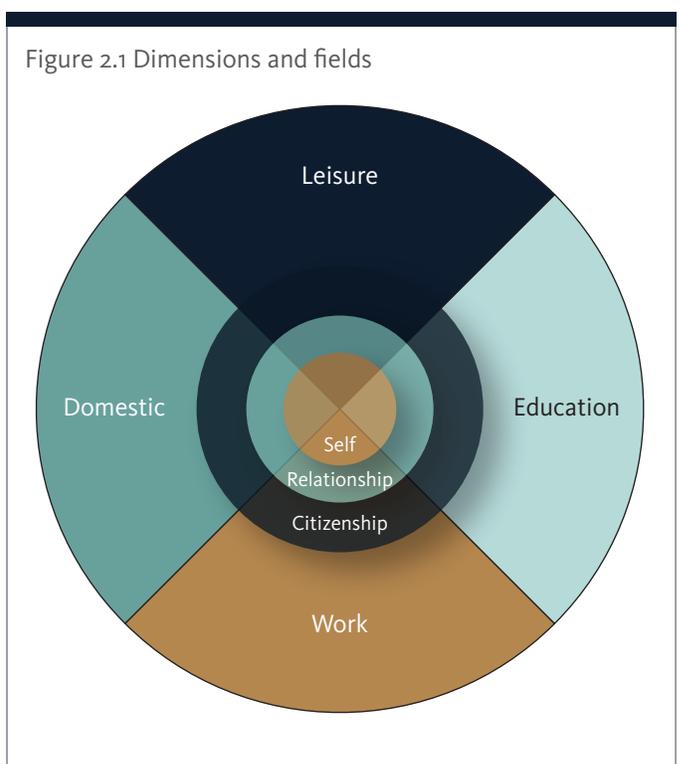
The significance or the investment that a young person makes in a particular domain, according to the researchers, can shrink and expand over time. And it can intersect with other domains, depending on the moment and preoccupations of the young individual. Forging and creating a personal future is a process that unfolds at multiple levels, both internally and in relation to the people and world around an individual.

A FIFTH DIMENSION

But the Henderson et al. framework leaves out an important dimension. Patel et al. (2013, p. 88) argued that while these four domains are recognized as legitimate spaces for young persons, there is a fifth space that has the potential to develop the skills, attitudes, beliefs and values that nurture all the other spaces. This fifth space is concerned with "active citizenship" and focuses on the self-transformation of society through young people.

Hence, youth-centric initiatives require as much emphasis on the immediate world of young persons as on the future – the links between the inner and outer worlds can open up new domains of engagements.

Resonating these ideas in the India context are youth groups that argue for youth-centric approaches (Patel et al., 2013). Emphasizing the importance of "experiential reflection", the youth-centric approach argues for "creating safe, youth-led spaces where they can take the journey of the self to society and back.... Where they experiment with creating impact in the world and, in turn, let the world impact their selves" (Patel et al., 2013, p. 46). Rather than organizations working



with young people in ways that aim to anticipate their future developmental potential or their duties to the nation, family and community, young people want personal transformative experiences. The spaces created, or the collective, becomes a forum not merely for reflection but also for analysis, exposure, learning, action and mentoring peers.

SECTION
02

STRATEGIES FOR COLLECTIVIZING GIRLS IN INDIA

Based on the primary research with community organizations, this chapter looks at the context and the rationale for promoting collective action with girls. The chapter responds to a few guiding questions: While policy articulates particular objectives, do field-based organizations mirror them? What are the types of collective forums for adolescent girls that are created and what are the links, if any, that exist between women's collectives and the interventions planned for young girls?

Through visits and interviews with staff of seven organizations (both urban and rural based), the study explored how organizations have built formal or informal forums, networks, clubs or whatever context within which they work with adolescent girls. The seven organizations encompassed:

- **Akshara, CORO, Vacha** in Maharashtra State
- **VOICE 4 Girls** in Hyderabad, Telangana State
- **Mahila Samakhya** in Andhra Pradesh State

- **Mohammad Bazar Backward Classes Development Society (MBBCDS)** in Birbhum District of West Bengal State
- **Sankalp** in Kota District of Rajasthan State.

The selection of organizations was based on wanting representation from different geographical areas of the country. Additionally, the researchers wanted a mix of domains: (i) rural- and urban-based work; (ii) those who initiated work in the 1990s and those that emerged in the past decade; and (iii) differing organizational perspectives: groups related to the women's movement, the development sector and youth-based organizations. The selected organizations straddled different perspectives simultaneously; many are linked to the women's movement but are also part of the development sector. For example, Mahila Samakhya (in Andhra Pradesh) is an autonomous body funded by the state government but also identifies itself with the women's movement.

Organizations working in a metropolis: Akshara, CORO, Vacha and VOICE 4 Girls

CONTEXT

The context of adolescent girls living in a major metropolis like Mumbai provides insights into the contradictory forces at work in the lives of young girls. In particular, communities and structures in dense conditions of survival attempt to control girls' lives yet, urban centers represent considerable opportunities for work, employment and education. An important factor in the nature of control exercised is identity: Mumbai is a mix of migrants from the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and from the state itself, such as the Marathi dwellers in the slums. Both regional and religious identities work in tandem, setting out norms that govern adolescent girls' lives in terms of their mobility, aspirations and their sexuality. Staff members from the three Mumbai-based groups (Akshara, CORO and Vacha) cited regional and religious identities as a major boundary between communities and an area of tension and conflict. In their view, the religious divide over the past decade has decreased in volatility, although sporadic violence between Hindus and Muslims continues.

The communities that the organizations work with are primarily Dalit and Muslim migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, tribal groups from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa, and Dalits, nomadic tribes and Muslims from Maharashtra and neighboring states. These regional identities along with their caste, ethnicity and religion have a strong bearing on adolescent girls.

Girls who come from the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, for instance, experience tremendous control and restrictions. In the infamous Mumbai slums, families are squeezed into congested housing quarters, and vigilance on young girls is intense and constant, with neighbors keeping track of their movements. The extent to which girls' sexuality is silenced is evident in fathers demanding that even the sound of their urinating within the house must not be audible outside.⁵ Household links with the home village are strong, and early marriage is a reality once girls turn 15 years old. For girls, family holiday visits back home are filled with dread because marriages are often solemnized among kin groups located in the village. Vacha staff members noted that 15-year-old girls in the villages are typically married off in these visits; many

experience being labeled as *shehari ladkis* (city girls), with its implicit connotations of being "of loose character", which results in greater disciplining by their parents in the village. According to the Vacha staff members, this is a "schizophrenic situation" – too many worlds in one.⁶

In contrast, girls native to Maharashtra and girls from the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala do not experience this degree of control. They are better resourced than migrants from the northern states. As a result, gender norms within these communities regard education through high school as necessary, in keeping with aspirations of mobility to a more middle-class lifestyle.⁷ For improved employment opportunities in the future, some degree of education or technical training is viewed to be necessary for girls.

RATIONALE FOR WORKING WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Akshara, CORO and Vacha each locate the work they do in the women's movement. And their engagement with issues related to women's rights, violence and legal entitlements frame their rationale for initiating interventions with adolescent girls. "Catching them young" was a refrain often heard from the leaders in these organizations during the research interviews.

Akshara grew out of the women's movement in the 1980s with campaigns targeting violence against women. It was established formally in 1995 as a response to the growing need for information and communication resources with a gender perspective. After a decade of dealing with adult women, there was recognition of the need to work with adolescent girls but with a different type of support. Because girls' needs, opportunities and aspirations are qualitatively distinct from the older generation and because avenues and programs for adolescent girls are few, the organizations thought their work on issues confronting girls required direct engagement.

CORO's journey into adolescent collective action emerged from their intense work with women in the 1990s in an adult literacy campaign. Literacy was not merely about women learning words but how to use the power of the word to reflect on their lives. Community engagements with women spiraled into working with men and, from that, wound into looking at the critical points when gendered identities are formed, constructed and enacted upon. This translated to CORO working with a

⁵ As reported by girls in the Vacha forum, in Indira Nagar *basti* on 13 March 2015.

⁶ Discussion with Vacha staff members on 12 March 2015.

⁷ The development indicators of states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu are way ahead of the northern states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. Lack of infrastructure, be it educational, health or even industry, has led to significant migration from these states to the big metropolises (Delhi and Mumbai).

range of age groups, from children in elementary schools to adolescent boys and girls. Insights from each have fed into how interventions and approaches are envisioned for working with the other age groups. CORO now takes a life-cycle approach in its intervention on gender equality. It works with children, adolescents and adults in challenging and changing discriminatory gender constructions.

Vacha started out as a resource center in Mumbai in 1987, setting up libraries in *bastis* (urban slum clusters) and promoting theatre and storytelling. Registered in 1990, it began to focus on young girls in 1995, bringing in a feminist perspective to empower girls. It still functions as such, documenting, researching and participating in activist forums and networks related to women's struggles for justice within the family and community and through state policies and legislation. The focus on running *basti* programs for young girls emerged from the perspective that if women's lives are to change, then intergenerational work is necessary. Explained one Vacha staff member, "The kinds of issues that women come with, the effort that goes into training and orienting them on how patriarchy works - if we were to do this with the younger generation, then some of these issues might pan out differently." The hope is that interventions at an earlier age would enable young girls to make more informed decisions in the future.

VOICE 4 Girls, the fourth urban group but operating in Hyderabad, is a somewhat recent newcomer. Started in 2011, it set out to provide opportunities to young girls from marginalized groups. It works with government, residential and low-cost private schools, with students of classes 7-11 in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Uttarakhand, and offering residential camps over summer and winter holidays for up to 35 students aged 11-18. VOICE 4 Girls staff members were unfamiliar (at the time of the interview) with the nature of women's organizing that has taken place over the past three decades in Andhra Pradesh State. The VOICE 4 Girls' mandate is to promote gender equality; its programming reaches out to girls in school settings and girls who are in residential hostels set up by the state government.

Strategies

DEVELOPING THE SELF AND DEVELOPING CITIZENSHIP

Although all three organizations operating in Mumbai work intensively on building the sense of "self" with girls, it was not their point of entry. Instead, their interventions were set up to offer girls a shared space where they could learn socially accepted skills in English, computers, photography or communication (such as preparation for job interviews).

Akshara additionally included fellowships to Muslim girls at the critical point of secondary education, when girls often drop out of school. The fellowships, which are also available now for college, help girls stall entry into the labor market or the burden of reproductive or care-related tasks.

Skills training and fellowships are typically the initial points of mobilizing adolescent girls in the domains of work or education. The Vacha classes and the Akshara fellowships provide the basis for regularly engaging with girls. But woven into these domains and in these spaces are curricula that cover gender issues related to being a girl: understanding the body, harassment, domestic violence, sexuality and



THE IDEA OF CITIZENSHIP IS INTEGRAL [TO WORKING WITH GIRLS]. THEY NEED TO BE PRODUCTIVE WORKERS, BECOME ACTIVE CITIZENS – ONLY THEN WILL THEY UNDERSTAND THEIR RIGHTS. TO COME FROM THE PRIVATE TO THE PUBLIC SPACE IS VERY IMPORTANT – PARTICIPATION IN FESTIVALS, PUBLIC SPACES, FILLING FORMS, ITS PROCEDURES, ETC. THEY ARE FIRST-GENERATION LEARNERS SO THEY HAVE TO BE TAUGHT THE BASICS. PERSONAL GROWTH CANNOT BE LIMITED TO SELF. IT HAS TO BE RELATED TO THE SOCIETY – AND THIS IS DONE THROUGH UNDERSTANDING POWER AND RIGHTS.”

VACHA STAFF MEMBER,
MUMBAI

relationships. Staff with both of those organizations explained that their inputs work to build girls' sense of self and give them the tools to negotiate relationships.

Over time, the organizations have moved into the dimension of citizenship- collectivizing girls around neighborhood-related issues, such as campaigns against sexual harassment, use of public toilets and sanitation and garbage disposal practices. Visits to police stations and interactions with municipal corporation officials are combined with more creative strategies, such as holding photo exhibitions on issues that concern girls (safe toilets, for instance) to urge engagement with the State and its structures. Use of public playgrounds for girls is another way in which the domain of leisure and sport intersect with issues of self and citizenship for girls.

Creating forums that facilitate regular interactions with young girls is a critical aspect of taking forward the work with girls. The Vacha collectives take the outward form of regular classes, which fosters a distinct identity of being "Vacha girls". It is their space, with no restrictions. They learn skills, create theatrical performances, have workshops and build friendships.

Friendships are very important - they become a kind informal support group. After growing out of the age bracket in the group, older girls have set up youth groups in their *basti* to sustain a forum for interaction with peers. For instance, girls from the Akshara and Vacha collectives have formed a separate mixed group with boys being included, called Umang,

which is committed to working on girls' issues.

Engagement with girls' families is strategic, revolving around annual events related to what girls have learned or done or communicating the vision and work of the organization. Some groups organize events that might involve mothers and daughters, although it is always clear that the events belong to the girls.

BUILDING NETWORKS AND LEADERSHIP

While working within *bastis* is one step toward building some form of collective identity, the groups interviewed in Mumbai have also moved to building a larger network and community of adolescent girls across the city, through an adolescent girls' leadership program aimed at creating a learning community (box 1). Starting out with three organizations, the program now includes ten organizations that work on different issues (one is a tribal-rights group based outside Mumbai).

Based on the many discussions during the research, strategies appear to move from working with girls on addressing practical needs (such as education fellowships) to interventions related to strategic interests (such as access to public spaces and ability to negotiate). One never really replaces the other, but there seems to be a complex simultaneous working with the self, relationships and on practices that govern daily social interactions. The leadership networks facilitate connection-making from the local to the macro context - from one's own issues then to neighborhood issues and then other neighborhoods.

BOX 1

LEARNING COMMUNITY INITIATIVE IN MUMBAI

Ten organizations in Mumbai have come together to work on developing leadership of young girls in the *bastis* (urban slum clusters) they work in, the objective being that adolescent girls identify issues in their community, plan interventions and take action. Each organization selects two girls from each *basti* they work in for a period of one year. The young leaders meet regularly. The forum is a space in which girls bring their issues, plan, develop strategies, take ideas and inputs from others, create budgets and review their work. Girls have taken up a range of issues, from sanitation and garbage disposal to harassment and linking with other campaigns, such as the Right to Pee campaign (a collaborative effort that calls attention to the lack of free, clean and safe public toilets for women in Mumbai). These campaigns involve speaking with locally elected leaders, corporate and municipal authorities and the community.

The leaders involve other girls in their *basti* to select issues and plan and implement activities. After a year, a new group of young leaders takes over and the previous batch become resource persons for the new leaders. Each organization works on different issues, and thus the network of leaders becomes a space for peer learning and engaging on a range of issues. This approach helps the young leaders build their understanding of issues at a macro level and see the links between them. Their capabilities are built up to lead, plan and negotiate with a range of people. A collective of skilled leadership emerges with a collegiate style of functioning. Organizations also learn from each other. The larger collective gives the members the leverage to build on their identity and skills. It gives them the networks, connections and information critical to the development of social capital.

This strategy of collectivizing, of developing skills and abilities in strategizing, planning, etc., builds the competencies of girls to further strengthen their sense of self. Providing knowledge, skills and opportunities is the foundation to building adolescent girls' collectives and their own stakes in transforming their lives and giving them an identity in their community. It is critical to make this journey toward citizenship possible; the journey entails the movement from self to other and beyond and then back. Sustained forums or platforms for girls to meet, to grow and practice their skills and perspectives are central to this process.

Organizations working in rural areas: Mahila Samakhya, MBBCDS and Sankalp

CONTEXT

In the rural contexts visited (Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Bengal), issues of domestic work, work in the informal economy and labor at an early age are a reality, specifically within tribal and Dalit communities. The rural context is diverse, and gender relations are impacted by geographical location, caste or ethnic relations, community dynamics and changing economic contexts. For instance, preference for a male child in Rajasthan among Sehariya tribal groups has in recent decades become an outcome or part of a shift to the mainstream practice of giving dowry (to the bridegroom) at the time of marriage. Both are new practices in a community that are in sharp contrast to existing Sehariya practice of paying bride price and of showing no marked preference for male children. The survival of families in the community has been and is still based on the subsistence tasks performed by women and girls. The migration of men to cities and aspirations to more mainstream practices has led to a shift in how women and girls are valued. This change has been quickened by the influx of sonography centers in Kota city, which has resulted in a declining sex ratio over the past two decades.

At the same time, there also has been a shift toward accessing education, and the participation of girls has dramatically increased in rural areas. Greater connectivity and communication has resulted in increased mobility of boys and girls. However, the poor quality of education and the payment of dowry for girls pushes families to pull girls out of school after upper primary levels and get them married.

The large, state-run Mahila Samakhya program in Andhra Pradesh has done substantive work over the past two decades with Dalit rural women on issues as diverse as agricultural wages, access to government programs, caste-based discrimination and different forms of sexual violence.

There are large federations, both Mahila Samakhya supported and separate self-help groups, involving thousands of women from the village to the district levels that are run and managed by different departments in the government. Self-help groups in Andhra Pradesh have been forums in which political parties in power have attempted to mobilize the vote of poor, rural women in their favor during state elections. Alcoholism, violence, poor representation in political forums, caste-based discrimination and hard labor characterize women's lived reality.

In a similar vein, in Birbhum district of West Bengal, there are a large number of self-help groups, some supported by the state government and some by NGOs like MBBCDS. This is a drought-prone area with soaring rates of violence against women



TO BRING UNMARRIED GIRLS TO OUR TRAINING IS A BIG CHALLENGE. THE FREEDOM WITH WHICH MARRIED WOMEN WORK, UNMARRIED GIRLS DO NOT... THE PROBLEM OF SEXUALITY OF GIRLS IS TREMENDOUS, AND THROUGH THIS, SOCIETY CONTROLS WOMEN. THE MORE WE WORK WITH WOMEN, THE MORE GIRLS' ISSUES WILL SURFACE. THERE IS A DIRECT CORRELATION BETWEEN INCREASING THE STRENGTH OF WOMEN'S SANGATHANS AND ADDRESSING GIRLS' ISSUES. WHEN WOMEN UNDERSTAND [THEIR RIGHTS] THEY REBEL —THEY DON'T SIT QUIETLY. HOWEVER, THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS TO GET YOUNG MARRIED GIRLS INTO CAMPS BECAUSE THE HUSBAND IS ANXIOUS ABOUT HER SEXUALITY AND THE IN-LAWS WANT HER TO WORK AT HOME. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS AND IN-LAWS IS DIFFERENT; WITH THE FORMER, GIRLS HELP WITH DOMESTIC WORK BUT THERE IS ALSO EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT, WHILE WITH THE IN-LAWS, GIRLS [ARE] THEIR PROPERTY."

SANKALP STAFF MEMBER,
KOTA

and a prevalent practice of dowry. West Bengal's politically charged nature exacerbates the poor development indicators of the state; the self-help groups face political pressures (from both the ruling Trinamool Congress as well as from the opposition Communist Party of India-Marxist), being offered incentives of economic and social entitlements in exchange for political support. Thus, economic and political interests impact poor women, especially those from marginalized groups, which represent 40 percent of the total population, and make work on girls' education or empowerment a challenge.

RATIONALE FOR WORKING WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The research discussions reflected multiple perspectives and journeys through which the rural-based groups articulated their decision to work with adolescent girls.

Mahila Samakhya is a state-run organization that began with the vision of forming women's collectives and forums. The Mahila Samakhya women's federations are separate from their self-help group collectives and federations. Women members in a village might overlap between these and the federations, but in terms of domains of action and work, the federations are completely different from other self-help groups. Their emphasis is on organizing women and empowering them to take on a range of issues; they do not focus on the management of loans and savings. The work with women and their progress to structured forums resulted in a request from girls in the community to form their own collectives. Mahila Samakhya has a mandate to work with young girls in terms of their accessing education. The push for universalization of primary education in the 1990s resulted in greater engagement with the central government's Sarva Shiksha

Abhiyan (Education for All) scheme.

MBBCDS registered in 2000 to work with Muslim and tribal women in Sainthia District of West Bengal State. The work expanded to Murshidabad and Howrah districts and focuses on strengthening access to entitlements for marginalized women and issues of education, livelihoods and human trafficking. The organization's work evolved into strategies that are preventive and curative, which then included working with girls. A transformative education program and leadership building for girls, especially Muslim girls, is at the core of the preventive work - enabling girls to move out from the restrictive social and material conditions of their lives and access education.

Sankalp's work with adolescent girls emerged through its work with the Sehariya tribal community on their marginalization and exclusion from mainstream society. Sankalp started work in 1982 in Kota District in Rajasthan State, raising issues of land, forests and entitlements along with the education of children. Sankalp's mandate is to build women's collectives to raise issues impacting the tribal community and bring the next generation of Sehariya boys and girls into mainstream education and empower them through skills, information and opportunities to learn. The education of Sehariya children is an important domain that Sankalp engages with to break the cycle of economic and social exclusion. Programs and projects in the 1990s, geared toward girls, provided opportunities to offer bridging courses that helped out-of-school Sehariya girls enroll into a regular school. The creation of a women's collective emerged later, in 2002, from the work that was initiated with the community. The women asked for their own forum through

BOX 2

VILLAGE FORUMS –THE PROTIRODH MANCH IN WEST BENGAL

In West Bengal's Birbhum district, girls engage in collectives across 17 villages, meet on the weekends, participate in sports activities and celebrate important dates, such as International Women's Day. These forums for adolescent girls position themselves as cultural and sports outlets in which girls are free to express themselves. Many organization staff members working with both women and girls pointed to this as a significant difference in how forums and platforms for adolescent girls are qualitatively different from the women's collectives. Thus, they emphasized, there is need to focus more on facilitating and enhancing girls' power of expression as a key component of their meetings and discussions.

As one of the girls in the Protirodh Manch, or leadership group, set up by MBBCDS explained, "We collectively see the problems of the village and learn how to help ourselves, how to be independent. It's our duty to bring the [other villagers] with us. We work on child marriage, good education, on logical reasoning, the situation of women and hygiene practices. When we see our mothers, we feel that their situation needs to change. I correct my mother. She taunts me, but I'm able to reason it. For instance, during [menstrual] periods I tell her openly to use pads." Another member of the leadership group added that she wants to complete her higher education and become the head of an organization like MBBCDS. The reasons are many for girls seeking such spaces. Some want to get back to school, some want to escape a poor school environment or lack of interest of teachers; others come to make friends, escape housework or to fulfil career dreams, such as becoming a policewoman.

which they could collectively work to access their rights and entitlements. Sankalp is active in campaigns and networks at the local, district and state levels.

Strategies

ACCESS TO STATE SERVICES

Both Mahila Samakhya and Sankalp have highly structured and powerful collectives of tribal and Dalit women that have developed leadership abilities and use collective action to demand services from state agencies and other social groups. They have mobilized and negotiated to access resources, bring the benefits of policies and programs to their villages and blocks and have challenged caste- and gender-related

practices. The Jagriti Mahila Manch (collective) in Mamuni block in Kota, for instance, is moving toward being part of a larger collective concentrating on protecting the rights of Sehariya tribal peoples in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Their identity as Sehariyas is strategically positioned in the collective.

MBBCDS in Birbhum block of West Bengal works with Muslim and Santhal tribal women in government-affiliated self-help groups as well as independent savings groups on entitlement and livelihood issues. Information and group activities have resulted in empowered women with the ability to negotiate with the local administration. Parallel to this process of working with women, Muslim and tribal girls are

BOX 3

THE FORMATION OF THE BALA SANGHAS IN ANDHRA PRADESH

After five years of organizing women, Mahila Samakhya staff members were approached in 1994 by girls wanting to meet independently because they had their own issues: discrimination within the household and being forced to leave school and to work in the cotton fields. It was bonded labor-like conditions in which their parents would take advance wages for the year and the entire family works in the fields. Working hours were long, and there was abuse in the field. Slowly, the girls formed *cheli sanghas*, or “friends’ groups”. They had seen their mothers in *mahila sanghas* (women’s collectives) and were aware of the visibility and ability they had achieved in speaking out on issues of caste, labor, wages and violence.

Mahila Samakhya started developing training programs on life skills for the girls. Mothers were happy at first because it contributed to household development (new ways to help out at home). They supported their daughters in attending trainings and even travelling outside the village. But then conflicts began to emerge when girls said they would not work long hours in the fields or insisted on lunch breaks, which prompted supervisors to complain to their parents. Eventually parents said enough of the learning new skills. But by then, the *cheli sanghas* were strong. Also, the women *mahila sangha* members whose daughters were in the *cheli sanghas* talked with and convinced mothers who were not in the collective to support their daughters’ continued presence in the *cheli sangha*.

Then an incident involving a girl working in the cotton fields who died from pesticide exposure was taken up by both the *cheli sanghas* and the *mahila sanghas*. Huge protests and street plays were performed against child labor, which was eventually banned in the cotton fields.

The girls who returned from the residential centers run by Mahila Samakhya (the Mahila Shikshan Kendra) came back to their village as activists and contributed to strengthening the *cheli sanghas* as peer educators on girls’ rights. They arranged regular meetings on fixed days twice a month with structured formalities (keeping minutes of each meeting, for instance) that mirrored the functioning of the *mahila sanghas*.

Around 1997, the issue of age became controversial in the *cheli sanghas* due to a big gap between members aged 11 and 18. Mahila Samakhya decided to limit age for membership in the *cheli sanghas* at 10–15 years, after which girls would continue for a year in the *cheli sanghas* or join the *mahila sanghas* because most girls would marry at around 16 years of age. Marriage did not preclude membership in the *cheli sanghas*, which has included 14-year-old married girls.

By 2000–2001 when the children’s rights discourse became strong, boys questioned Mahila Samakhya on why they were not included in the *cheli sangha*. They, too, wanted information on children’s rights, HIV, village development schemes, agriculture and career guidance. There was a discussion in all the districts where the organization operated on whether boys should be part of the existing forums. Women *mahila sangha* members resisted inclusion of boys in the *cheli sanghas*, but both boys and girls wanted to have a mixed group. Mahila Samakhya listened to the girls, and the *cheli sanghas* became *bala sanghas* (mixed youth collectives).

mobilized through village forums to access residential schools, scholarships to continue schooling beyond the primary level, health services and life skills education.

The impact of the collective has been positive on adolescent girls in all three organizations in terms of establishing education as a core value. In Kota, the Jagriti Mahila Manch women mobilize girls to attend five-month residential camps organized by Sankalp. Computer skills, providing information on various themes and encouraging girls' expression is a core component of the camp; it is designed to help girls who have dropped out of school or have not been to school enroll in a regular school. After the camp, many girls seek admission to tribal hostels set up by the state in order to pursue education up to the secondary or higher secondary levels.

Sankalp staff members highlighted the challenge of bringing young unmarried girls into the camps and the critical role of women.

In some areas, state-run computer centers have been opened for boys and girls as part of a skills development (Kaushal Vikas) scheme. With girls, work on the self and learning to negotiate their right to an education, to enhance their mobility and to move away from the drudgery of domestic work are areas that have been prioritized. Yet, there are few forums for girls that work in the domain of citizenship.

In the strong women's savings groups of MBBCDS, Muslim, Dalit and Santhal members advocate for education as the way in which their daughters will access government jobs, mobility and respect and thus have lives different from theirs. The organization uses this community support in tandem with its own prerogative that education is the primary domain in which transformation in girls' lives or the norms they are constrained by (in terms of marriage) can be challenged. The adolescent girls in the MBBCDS village collectives take up issues that hinder girls from accessing school, such as sexual harassment to and from school and in school and early marriage.

RESPONDING TO WHAT YOUTH ASK FOR

Most of the rural organizations visited for this research work in a structured or sustained way with women's collectives but do not reflect the same engagement or work with girls' collectives. The latter takes the form of informal meetings or forums enabled through project work. In stark contrast, the experience of Mahila Samakhya in Andhra Pradesh reflects the nature and form of collective that girls and boys need.

In Kota, a Yuva Ekta Manch (United Youth Forum) is emerging that includes both boys and girls. The issues that this nascent forum is taking on include monitoring payments in

BOX 4

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER — THE POWER OF VOICE AND COLLECTIVES

The Right to Pee Campaign in Mumbai provides an interesting study of how collectives of women and girls can effectively advocate together for their rights, build knowledge, access public spaces, create new discourses and network in new ways to push for change.

The Right to Pee Campaign was initiated by CORO, and there are 33 organizations working with women and girls that are part of this campaign. It emerged out of a Quest fellowship program that started nearly four years ago for free public urinals for women and girls that are safe and hygienic. The Bruhanmumbai Municipal Corporation has free urinals for men but charge a fee for restrooms for women. Women migrant workers and girls travelling to school and colleges do not have access to a public restroom if needed. The campaign argued that women end up controlling their bladder for long periods, which along with dirty toilets, has led to many health infections. Demanding "potty parity", the campaign filed a right-to-information request and gathered data on the drastic inequality in the number of male and female toilets, took photographs on the condition of women's toilets and collected 60,000 signatures.

Organizations working with adolescent girls involved the girls' forums in projects on documenting toilet facilities available locally: their condition, issues of safety, privacy and problems of managing menstrual hygiene. This essentially moved it out of the dominant discourse in policy that only articulates toilet issues within the domain of the school.

The Bruhanmumbai Municipal Corporation in its gender budget of 2013–2014 finally sanctioned 750,000 rupees for constructing public female toilets, and work is progressing in 96 locations.

a government guaranteed-work scheme,⁸ village cleanliness and pension payments, which is actually the agenda of the Jagriti Mahila Manch (the women's collective) – not a “youth” agenda. Its own issues and concerns have yet to emerge. In the case of Mahila Samakhya, although the youth group formed on the heels of the women's collective, they were able to forge their own agenda and work on their interests. This process has carried forward with the creation of formal *bala sanghas*, or youth groups of girls and boys (box 3).

The detailed description of the emergence of the *cheli sanghas* (box 3) and the nature of emerging issues, both in terms of action in the community and the internal structure, point to the importance of working on both external and internal targets (Batliwala, 2013, p. 105). Externally, a target can be the State or other social groups; internally, it can be the nature of the structure itself. In Andhra Pradesh, the nature of the *cheli sangha* changed over time, bringing in boys to transform itself into the *bala sangha*.

⁸ The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, or NREGA, was later renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or MGNREGA; it is an Indian law that guarantees the right to work in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

SECTION
03

GIRLS' EDUCATION AND SEXUALITY AS FIELDS FOR CHANGE

Education and sexuality are major areas of interest for NGOs working with adolescent girls as well as government and international agencies. They are both issues of anxiety and concern for families and communities. They are also domains with their own risks and opportunities. The organizations working with either (or both) domain believe that social transformation sought for women and girls in India begins with changes in how families and communities approach education and sexuality issues for adolescent girls. This chapter singles out the education and sexuality-related strategies used for working with girls to ultimately achieve greater gender equity and social transformations.

Education

Across the spectrum of players, be it state or international agencies, NGOs or communities, education has emerged as the key domain for action in transforming the lives of adolescent girls. Over the past

decade, statistics on enrolment, drop-out rates and completion of elementary and secondary education have become major markers for measuring gender parity at the national and state levels. Interventions have been geared to reducing gender gaps in education, improving girls' access to education and ensuring their participation. This study reiterated this, although in terms of outcomes, there were significant differences across organizations. Getting girls to school and making sure that they complete higher education offers its own risks and opportunities to all concerned. It is important therefore to look at what education for young women represents to different players in this sector.

Over the past two decades the Government of India has waged a Herculean effort to universalize elementary education; in the past five years, achievements have led to a powerful push to promote universal secondary education as the next

milestone.⁹ Despite increased enrolments, though, drop out rates are high, with close to 50 percent of students leaving school prior to completing their elementary education and an even smaller proportion making it to the secondary level. While the government education system has expanded, the private sector has stepped up extensively to reap the commercial possibilities from the increasing demand for education, even among poor families. In the past decade, there has been a mushrooming of private schools, even in the rural hinterland, in which English as the medium of instruction attracts students across class and caste.¹⁰

Education is thus increasingly a reflection of the economic class, geographical location and social status of the community it is servicing. It is also emerging as a consumer product, for which the poor jostle to break the implicit hierarchies of access (Ramachandran, 2007).

Families see education as the means to breaking out of the cycle of poverty in the absence of other resources. For the middle class and elite economic classes, it is about maintaining privilege and practicing new forms of exclusion or segregation; quality of education has become important constituent of the new hierarchies that are emerging in the domain of education. Poor children and girls in general attend government schools that are often critiqued for quality of education, while boys and the upwardly mobile attend private schools, which come in a range of sizes and costs.

These realities are embedded in the contexts in which grass-roots organizations work. For organizations, however, it is not only access to education but keeping young people in school, the quality of their learning and the content of their education that make this an important field of action. Girls' desire for education is not to fulfill policy dreams of better financial management of the home and of children in the future – it is tied to

⁹ Joint Review Mission reports of the government of India, the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* document and the *Right to Education* policy document (2010) are reflections of the State's commitment to the provisioning of education. Gross enrolment ratio of Scheduled Caste girls jumped in the decade between 1991 and 2001, from 63.5 percent to 75.5 percent; for Scheduled Tribe girls, it increased from 60.2 percent to 73.5 percent. This is a major achievement in terms of the real number of girls impacted.

¹⁰ At the elementary education level, the State is a major player in the provision of education across India; the secondary level, however, private schools constitute a significant proportion.



IT IS ONLY BY CLUTCHING AT EDUCATION THAT GIRLS CAN POSTPONE THEIR MARRIAGE.”

FIELD WORKER IN A MUMBAI BASTI

BOX 5

REACHING GIRLS OUTSIDE AND INSIDE SCHOOLS

VOICE 4 Girls initially trained 200 teachers to run their two-week camps. These camps covered information regarding menstruation, positive images about being girls and some basic skills regarding decision making. The camps initially proved to be unsuccessful as they did not incorporate activity-based pedagogy. Additionally, the power dynamic between teachers and adolescents was skewed. The organization shifted its approach and trained girls aged 13–24 years (the majority of whom were university students) to work as counselors and co-counselors. The campers are immensely influenced by the counselors, who become role models. To reach out to students who cannot attend the camps and to create a support system within the schools, VOICE 4 Girls now also trains teacher-selected girls as *sakhis*, or peer leaders. They are trained in a simplified version of the camp curriculum (during each afternoon of the camp period) and then when they return to school, they work with their classmates for a year. Working as peer leaders has been so influential for the girls that they are now working to create their own forum (for 3,600 *sakhis*) that goes beyond the annual reunion that VOICE 4 Girls organizes for them.

what school represents now: freedom, mobility, the possibility of friendships and of discovering themselves.

WORKING WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

To address the quality of education issue, organizations work within the education system (in schools) to offer young people opportunities for access to certain types of knowledge, skills and opportunities for expression. For girls from marginalized communities who are not enrolled in any formal school, organizations provide a support structure outside of the education system that they can turn to for help in gaining entry to school, for extra classes so they do not fall behind, for life skills training or for special training on such issues as health.

Organizations that engage with the system, like VOICE 4 Girls, work with adolescent girls in schools, mostly government-run residential schools, where they provide training (they also offer camps outside of the school). VOICE 4 Girls organizes two-week camps (box 5) for girls that combine teaching of English along with a curriculum that empowers girls to gain self-confidence. An important objective is to prevent girls from dropping out as they approach high school. As a VOICE 4 Girls staff member explained, "They can imagine a different future for themselves. To be told that you have options is critical, especially in a residential school because there is no outside contact, life is very isolated here and marriage at 16 is the only thing they've been told."

Organizations like CORO and Vacha also work within schools, providing extra-curricular training. CORO conducts a gender program in middle schools that encourages boys and girls to explore how gender identities are formed and how they impact their world. Vacha organizes fairs and workshops with schools, bringing in ideas, concepts and creative activities to link with the world of learners in meaningful ways.

Working with the school system is not without its challenges. It requires immense patience regarding bureaucratic delays and slow decision-making. CORO and Vacha staff members spoke of activities being delayed by up to six months out of a lack of interest on the part of school administrators or their preoccupation with completing their own curriculum. Added to this limitation is the virtual silence on issues of sexuality that the school system demands of any intervention.

The other challenge is that much of this work is not sustained over time; rarely are organizations able to build over two or three years with a particular group of students as they progress toward secondary school. And there is a danger that many interventions are viewed by the system as fun and

creative events rather than as something that encourages critical thinking among learners.

RESIDENTIAL SPACES FOR CHANGE

In the rural context, a common strategy is to create spaces for girls to access education through long residential camps or schools, as with the work of MBBCDS and Sankalp. These spaces combine school subject teaching with a range of curricula developed primarily with the objective of empowering girls. Girls who are outside formal schooling can enter these residential schools to catch up through bridging courses that enable them to enroll into a regular school. These courses can range anywhere from three months to a year.

The residential school space becomes the point in which girls experience what it means to collectively engage with processes of critical reflection and to analyze their life situation, with the freedom to play and do things together as a group. The organization combines regular teaching commensurate with secondary to higher secondary level with what it describes as the empowering aspect of knowledge and learning, building leadership among girls. Girls are exposed to the writings and ideas of pioneering feminists and dip into areas that might rarely be discussed in regular schools, such as dowry, marriage or the local practice of witch hunting.

A CURRICULUM FOR FEMINIST COLLECTIVE ACTION

Organizations working with girls recognize that they are working with mostly first-generation learners. For them, empowerment is identified with command over the English language; from the written word it has moved to competency in using a computer. Many organizations operating in the urban context, including Akshara, CORO, Vacha and VOICE 4 Girls, strategically offer classes in English language, computer skills and remedial education to establish collectives for girls while filling in gaps in school content or quality. This is their first point of entry that has wider acceptance with communities seeking social and economic mobility for their children. English as the language of empowerment and computers represent the new arenas of social capital desired for the next generation.

Although learning English and mastering computer skills provides the attraction for girls, the organizations consider the opportunity for girls to learn about issues related to gender and rights in a collective forum as critical. Vacha's education curriculum for girls is structured around developing skills, which covers spoken English, computer proficiency, photography, communication and negotiation skills and building an understanding of self. This content moves over time to developing an understanding of laws and institutions, such as

the police and public offices, and learning to access public spaces. With knowledge and skills come opportunities to practice in the form of creating newsletters, creative writing, exhibitions, press conference and seminars to present their learning to the community. Akshara (works with a slightly older age group of girls who are completing high school and entering college) also offers that same focus along with training on how to seek employment opportunities (such as preparing resumes and job interviews). Residential workshops provide more intensive inputs on gender issues, human rights, the body and self. Self-defense is also taught in these workshops.

WOMEN'S COLLECTIVES AND GIRLS' EDUCATION

Where women's collectives co-exist with girls' forums, the centrality of education in girl's lives is well established and supported by them. Its benefits, as articulated by the women, are a happy mix of future employability, domesticity and citizenship. Asked why girls' education is important, a member of the Jagriti Mahila Samiti responded, "One can contest *panchayat* [local] elections only if you are an eighth [grade graduate]. The Sehariya seat was empty this year. To become an Anganwadi¹¹ teacher, it has increased from class 8 to 10. Beyond class 8, it's important so that girls can earn, support themselves, teach their children and change their family and slowly [change] others. Most importantly, they gain confidence. And then violence will reduce as she will know the laws."

In the focus group discussions for this study, women also spoke of how girls use education to challenge their families on early marriage. In collective meetings, women members often talked about how their daughters argue against marriage, threatening to run away or pointing out that they do not want to be caught in the same situation as their mothers. They question their mother's struggle both within the home and outside and clearly want a different future for themselves.

For girls, there are practical costs to be paid for their choices, despite a larger policy-level discourse pushing for their education. They are juggling between what the community or the family views as the appropriate age till which they can pursue their education and the age at which they are to be married to settle down. Their desire to educate themselves and become independent and confident and seek new forms of work different from their mothers brings its own risks. For them and their families, the questions that emerge are: Will they find boys to marry? Will they become too independent? Will they find employment? What if they don't settle down? And how much will gender roles and their class and caste determine the possibilities that education creates for them? The innovative processes that they are part of, their improved command over English and their exposure to new ideas, debates and skills all cultivate a social capital within them that is generically articulated as "increased self-confidence".

Mobilizing resources to help adolescent girls imagine a different future requires not only individual effort and skill but also collective transition into education that creates social capital rather than reaffirms girls' lower status in the hierarchies of education.

Sexuality

At the heart of organizations' work with adolescents is the issue of sexuality. The body, its changes and its attractions are the major preoccupations of young people, but it is the source of anxiety for the community and the State. It is an age of curiosity

IS EDUCATION A SAFE ISSUE TO WORK ON WITH GIRLS?



IF IT IS INFORMATION, IT IS EASY. BUT IF IT IS ABOUT MAKING IT A PART OF YOUR LIFE, CONTEXTUALIZING IT, THEN IT IS TOUGH. I DON'T GIVE IMPORTANCE TO BENEFITS, SUCH AS DELAY IN MARRIAGE OR GIRLS HAVING FEWER CHILDREN. THE BENEFITS OF EDUCATION, TO MY MIND ARE, TO END EXPLOITATION AND DISCRIMINATION."

SANKALP STAFF MEMBER

¹¹ Anganwadi means "courtyard shelter" and was started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the integrated child development services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition.

and experimentation, when different identities are explored and parental control and authority are tested. And whatever might be adolescents' self-perceptions, for the State and the community they are seen to be in a high-risk category, prone to irresponsible behavior mostly associated with undesirable sexual activity, drug abuse, lack of discipline and violence (Bhog, Mullick and Bhardwaj, 2010, pp. 221–264).

This is the terrain for groups working with adolescents. Sexuality is like the elephant in the room – impossible to ignore yet equally difficult to hide or take cover from. “The path to discovering the self can be a lonely exercise, confusing if not bewildering for a young person,” said a Mahila Samkhya staff member. “And it is collective forums that make it possible for young people to talk and learn from each other. Often girls are unable to voice issues related to their bodies due to fear or shame; therefore, spaces that encourage conversations on these issues make a significant difference in this process.”

A well-established strategy, through feminist action across the world, is the formation of resource centers, with content and opportunities for sharing of information on menstruation and hygiene that opens the window to many other areas of interest.

WORKING WITH SCHOOLS AND TABOO TOPICS

By far the most popular concerns among girls are puberty and menstruation. Yet in the school space, certain topics are taboo, such as how does conception take place or romantic and sexual relationships. Speaking of the limits placed on curricular content, a VOICE 4 Girls staff member said, “The chapter on special relationships is very tough. We can say sperm meets egg but cannot say how it's done. Or the school principals tell us, ‘You will be the reason why girls and boys are having sex.’ When girls talk about attraction, the counselors have to say things we don't believe in, but need to in order to position ourselves so that our camps are not stopped in schools. So we say, ‘Wait till camp gets over, focus on your study.’ We know there are missing links; for example, condoms are absent in the contraceptive family planning session.”

The resource centers or autonomous spaces created by organizations working with women and girls in the community offer greater scope of addressing issues of sexuality, while a school space poses limitations. CORO ran a program with female Muslim and Dalit youth aged 15–25 years for nearly four years with a stated objective of improved health outcomes. But the group discussed issues related to pregnancy, sexuality and intimate relations. The understanding was that the nature of discussions would not be shared with the family or others outside the group. Often it is difficult to maintain confidentiality, however; as a result, dealing with sexuality is like walking a tight rope for some organizations.

“Hormones do not wait for girls to turn 18, and an unsupportive home leads girls to look for emotional support outside. Romantic involvements affect group formation negatively, as one elopement results in the entire group being disbanded. But persistence and discussions with families help rebuild the group once again,” explained a Vacha field worker. “What we communicate to the girls is that these feelings are not sinful, they are legitimate. They will not reduce, they will only increase, but that they must not give into a boy's demands for fear that their refusal will result in him losing interest.” Many organization staff members pointed out that girls in their collectives inform them in confidence of potential elopements or pressure from boys because of the strong sense of bonding in the group.



THE FIRST TRAINING WE STARTED IN ANDHRA HAD A MIXED GROUP. OUT OF SOME 20 GIRLS, 10 HAD ALREADY BEEN MARRIED, THREE HAD BEEN ABANDONED. ... THEIR NEEDS WERE VERY DIFFERENT. AND HERE WE WERE ALL SAYING, WE SHOULD MAKE THEM INTO ELECTRICIANS, BREAK STEREOTYPES AND DO ALL KINDS OF [THAT] STUFF. AND WHAT IS IT THAT THE GIRLS WERE ASKING? THEY JUST SAID ONE THING — ‘I DON'T WANT TO HAVE ANY CHILDREN. THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO KNOW. I DON'T WANT TO KNOW ABOUT ALL THIS STUFF, FORGET ABOUT ALL THE ELECTRICIAN STUFF AND ALL THAT.’ IT'S NOT THAT INPUTS ON HEALTH WERE NOT BEING GIVEN, BUT IT WAS NOT IN TERMS OF WHAT THEY WANTED OR DESIRED OR REQUIRED.”

EDUCATION CONSULTANT IN HYDERABAD

Direct intervention within the home or family of a girl is rarely part of an organization's strategy when working with girls. The forum or collective is the supportive space that is provided, but the emphasis is on building each girl's ability to negotiate with her family. Girls in the group also do not intervene within the home if a girl is in trouble but will support one another in their college or school or in finding work or in their romances. There is recognition that the vulnerability of girls is high and that girls are even lower than women in the power hierarchy in the family. And legally, they are not adults. As minors, such actions can lead to girls losing shelter and support from the family, and this is what determines the arms-length policy that organizations follow. What groups, such as Akshara, CORO, Sankalp and Vacha, do is to work on creating support for girls within the family by setting up mother-daughter events, organizing annual events for families and involving the women's collectives in building an ecosystem to support girls' voices and choices. But this is not easy.

Often, women's collectives cannot handle the energy and issues of girls. They find it difficult to cope with the open manner in which girls might talk. Girl's issues, such as tensions around love, marriage, choice, caste, religion and life style (wearing no *bindi*, but bangles and jeans) are not seen by women's groups as significant at times.

CHOICE IN MARRIAGE

Girls' choice in marriage is a tough arena that even women's collectives are reluctant to tread. When asked about their stand on girls running away to marry outside their caste or religion, the highly empowered women of the Jagriti Mahila Samiti collective smiled and responded diplomatically; said one woman, "Romance problems? We have separate camps for girls and boys. We talk to them. There will be no romance, only *badnaami* [a bad name or reputation]. Inter-caste marriages happen in the villages not here [in the collective]."

Women who were part of MBBCDS savings groups in Birbhum district, who were strong advocates for education and forging different futures for their daughters, didn't show such enthusiasm when asked about choice of marriage, even going so far as to say that girls were on their own if they decided to marry someone of their own choice.

There is a need to look at the issue of right to choose not only in terms of individual cases but as a collective issue for young people because it is a challenge to the power of families, parents, the State and the law. When people younger than 18 make informed choices regarding marriage, a contradiction emerges. A staff member with Mahila Samkhya pointed out that while they do acknowledge the larger discourse of preventing early marriage, the dilemma for their youth group has been cases of right to

choose (when and with whom) in which either the boy or the girl is legally underage. *Bala sangha* (youth collective) members have tried to raise these issues, but there is the danger that they will be totally isolated or sidelined.

Such cases are common in urban areas, where the possibility of disappearing in the vastness of the metropolis seems like adequate cover. According to an Akshara staff member, "In Mumbai, there are girls who are not bothered at all about where they come from in terms of their caste or religion. Their dream is to go to college and fall in love. Some do rebel, get a job and leave." This is true for other areas too, both rural and urban.

Communities often make decisions and arrangements to facilitate the marriage of girls as a means of "protecting" their honor, with enforcement officials turning a blind eye to the law. Yet, when young people raise these issues or choose to marry, they are subjected to threats of legal action as a means of disciplining them.

Several organization staff members stated that they do not explicitly take on such cases of early marriage or those related to choice, particularly those that involve inter-caste or inter-religious marriage, out of fear that backlash from the community could threaten the work they do with girls and boys. The strength and unanimity of social institutions on the issue of choice in marriages is evident from the threats of cases being slapped on organizations and the fear of honor killing, abduction, etc. The few organizations that do take on these cases separate their staff so that those who work on such cases are different from those who mobilize girls into their forums.

The nature of support required is also different because there is greater legal work that is involved in marriage cases. In those situations, NGOs seek the support of women's rights organizations or legal resource groups to help girls in need or for advice on how to proceed on certain issues. And in such cases, it becomes even more important that collectives of women are strengthened and sustained so that they can take on the messy work of tackling issues of sexuality, desire and marriage in changing contexts.

SHIFTING STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS EARLY MARRIAGE

Organizations' work on early marriage is also more indirect. As discussed in the education section, organizations support and encourage girls to dream of new opportunities and different life trajectories by pursuing education. Situations regarding the intensity of early marriage vary, though in most groups the majority of girls are married or under pressure to marry between 16 to 18 years of age.

In a city like Mumbai, there is a delay overall in keeping with the aspirations and expectations of families, where women's employment is key to sustaining the household. But this also varies across communities. Families from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar still seek to marry their daughters early. However, now there are cases of girls continuing their education after marriage while staying with their in-laws. Girls, too, have expectations from their partners as they seek certification and qualification for themselves. Many want their dream husband to work in an office or a small business and provide for them to have a room (*kholi*) of their own. Class mobility is a major aspiration of those who possess educational certificates in the city.

The situation in rural areas is much more diverse. For instance, in the Sehariya community in Rajasthan the problem is not so acute. Early marriage is not the issue as much as is the right to choose whom to marry. However, in Birbhum district in West Bengal, early marriage is a critical issue among Dalit and Muslim girls, and the doctrine of resisting early marriage seems to be strongly driven home with girls in the forums created by the MBBCDS. According to the head of MBBCDS, "Dowry is very high here because girls are not respected. In this system [patriarchy], rape is common, and so there is fear of honor – therefore early marriage. If the boy is working, the dowry is as high as [900,000 rupees]; day laborers ask for [200,000–300,000 rupees]. Girls are unwanted everywhere. If one has to pay [300,000 rupees] for dowry, then why pay for her education?" The work through the forums, rippling out to the kinds of decisions and peer counseling that happens among girls, thus pivots around the issues of resisting early marriage.

Organization staff members raised the issue of how talking about the negative impact of early marriage on girls' lives was not always the best way of articulating the issue to young girls. For instance, the head of MBBCDS admitted, "Our curriculum used to be more critical and aggressive. But when we realized that most girls in the classroom who were about to get married didn't come back to class, we began focusing on building a perspective on marriage itself. We don't focus on stopping early marriage, but rather focus on conversations around it."

Marriage is an important part of young people's lives; it is associated with intimate desires and, at times, is viewed

as a means of freedom for young people.¹² The domains of conversations on marriage cover an entire gamut of relations between the sexes.

Where groups work with married and unmarried girls, the areas of interest are different. According to a CORO staff member, "We kept the married and unmarried women separate for the sessions, no matter what their age was, because their issues were different. For married women, it was the pressures of pregnancy and in-laws. With water being provided in cans at home, their mobility decreased. For the unmarried it was about the tensions around marriage; they also shared that they can't talk openly with the married women out of fear of confidentiality." The most disempowered group that emerged through the course of interactions with different organizations was that of married young women. They were the most difficult to include in women's collectives.

The demands on their time, both by their husbands who are also keen to control their mobility and by their in-laws, make mobilization of young married women most challenging. Confusion has emerged in the *bala sanghas* regarding at what point girls who are married should enter the women's collective: after they marry or after they turn 18? The issue is the difficulty of mapping the precise moment when girls become women.

Mobility is an even bigger issue for married girls. Until they finish their reproductive work, generally around 30 years of age, married girls disappear from collective action into their marital home to fulfill the roles expected of them as wife and mother.

WORKING WITH MIXED GROUPS

Work with boys and young men is critical in transforming ideas related to masculinity and femininity that create inequalities. CORO, Mahila Samakhya, Vacha and VOICE 4 Girls moved to working with boys over time (others, like Sankalp, started out working with both). There are multiple reasons for this shift.

In CORO, Mahila Samakhya, and Vacha, the push came from boys who wanted to be included in the forums and activities organized for girls. They were keen to talk about issues related to sexuality, growing up, health, HIV and

¹² Economic considerations and processes of control over women's and girls' productive and reproductive labor frame the norms of marriage. Over the past two decades, research or work on the institution of marriage and its implications on the lives of women and girls across class and caste has slowed down in the women's movement. The movement has been disengaged with the issue of early marriage. The politics, particularly the gender politics, of early marriage are absent in a discourse dominated by representing early marriage as a social evil that can be dealt with through the threat of legal action and behavioral change (Nirantar, 2014, p. 6).

work. For organizations like Vacha, it was a progression from building girls' leadership to recognizing that brothers have an important role in exercising power over their sisters in the family. CORO initiated a four-year program to talk to young men about issues of masculinity and the culture of violence (reaching 1,200 young men). They learned from that experience that working with boys on issues of masculinity must start at an early age. They then shifted to working with boys and girls in middle schools.

Boys are interested in accessing inputs on unemployment, work and career options. The pressures to find work and employment are intense, and in rural areas, there is desire to learn computer skills to access new forms of employment. But several organizations see boys as having the power to claim forums and participate in decision-making at a much faster pace than girls. Thus, their work with mixed forums seeks to ensure that boys do not dominate girls.

While mixed-sex forums create the possibility for a new culture of interaction, it is important to be mindful that boys learn to let adolescent girls lead and determine their agendas. It is also important for girls to experience holding power that comes from their own space, networks, knowledge, new relationships and leadership.

Organizations were mindful of the fact that boys have greater access to opportunities for leisure and learning in the form of *yuvak mandals* (youth groups), sports clubs, etc. where they can engage with their peers. It is also more difficult to form collectives with boys as they are busy working or then pursuing jobs or higher education.

Sankalp has been working with young boys and girls from the start and their strategy of work involves working with both separately in different camps, and building a critical understanding on different issues. Following this, boys and girls are brought together to participate in mixed camps. It is demanding for the staff since these are residential camps

and the responsibility of ensuring that nothing untoward happens is entirely theirs, and the community's trust in the organization hinges on this.

VIOLENCE AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Harassment, domestic violence and abuse are part of girls' lived experiences. Many organizations and collectives take on these issues with girls, although, their processes of working or building an understanding of these issues are different.

Most of the organization staff members who were interviewed noted that while their entry point with girls is education and health, with boys it is livelihood, sex, sexuality and gender. Addressing the gender question inevitably raises issues of violence and masculinity. The pedagogy is different because violence with girls requires it – most organizations do not take on an active interventionist role or do case work in the manner that women's groups do. Explained one Sankalp staff member, "What is violence for us may not be for them. We plan a strategy. We are their support system, to increase their negotiation skills. We don't use the term 'violence'; we ask what needs to change? Violence is naturalized. [We hear]: 'Papa has a bad temper, therefore, I don't rebel.' How to keep your voice political not radical – that is what we try to [teach]. We talk about citizenship and not rights and build language around that. The decision on what the strategy should be is with the girls. We need to respect their decision."

What many organizations have encouraged is getting girls to engage on issues of sexual harassment in their localities and in other public spaces. Through campaigns, street plays, workshops and trainings they have taken up issues of control over girls' mobility and fear of violence more publicly. This is an issue where they have also involved young men who are part of mixed groups, to participate in these campaigns.

BOX 6

MANAGING SEXUALITY IN THE BALA SANGHA

For five to six years, Mahila Samkhya staff members found it difficult to manage the *bala sangha*, or mixed group, due to issues of mobility, discrimination and sexuality. The Mahila Samkhya staff members also were uncomfortable with a mixed group. They then decided to have two resource group members from the *mahila sangha* (women's collective) be part of the *bala sangha* meetings to talk about reproductive health and adolescence. This arrangement continued for couple of years, until it was decided that girls could handle their own issues. In 2005, the resource women stopped going to every *bala sangha* meeting. But the challenge continues in managing issues of sexuality. Girls primarily discuss issues of desire, attraction and support for each other privately with a Mahila Samkhya resource member.

SECTION
04

CONCLUSIONS

Meanings of words change over time. The context and meaning of collectivizing was different in the 1980s than it is today. Back then, women's collectives emerged in an environment of "conscientization" (Freire, 2006) as a result of an emerging conceptualization of empowerment and the experience of protest and legal reform in the autonomous women's movement of 1970s India.

Global policy on adolescent girls speaks in the language of investments and benefits and neoliberal notions of what constitutes "development". This frames how collectives are viewed in policy papers: as a way of organizing girls so that governments and other actors can access large numbers of girls to whom they deliver schemes. Data speak loudly, and this is another powerful catalyst in pushing for investments in bringing girls together in forums, clubs, classes, networks, etc. (collectives), toward the goal of improving data on girls or indicators of development on adolescent girls.

Yet, the motivations that emerged from the field in this study for creating collectives of adolescent girls are different. And the outcomes sought are therefore altered. Many organizations came to work with adolescent girls by first organizing women and working on their rights and entitlements. Their work is part of a deepening engagement with gender issues across different age groups. Their understanding of adolescent girls' situation is located in a larger framework of structures and institutions of power and control. They see the long-term objectives of working with girls in challenging patriarchy as an institution to achieve gender equality.

Others have come to their work with adolescent girls through their work with marginalized communities and, within this, focusing on the emerging generation of young boys and girls. Identity and gender come together for such groups, both in terms of how they are excluded from mainstream development and the erasure of their cultural and social

worlds. This translates into interventions emphasizing both access to existing schemes and initiatives affirming their own lived world.

Women's and girls' collectives

Policy and advocacy documents and research on the status of adolescent girls are marked by "paradoxes of absence" (Antipode, 2008) in their representation of adolescent girls: women and their struggles for gender equality find hardly any reference. While adolescent girls are increasingly viewed as potentially the empowered women of the future, they must continue to bear the burden of bettering family and community and producing able, healthy children. The existing knowledge and experience of collectivizing women is absent, and the hard-fought gains are seen to be of little consequence to how work with adolescent girls is imagined and positioned.

At the grass-roots level, however, there is a symbiotic relationship between women's collectives and adolescent girls' collectives: they create the enabling environment for girls' collectives to grow. They also share common long-term objectives of gender equality. Women mirror what the future holds for girls, and adolescent girls provide women a sense of the possibilities of change. The existence of women's collectives provides an important buffer to grass-roots organizations to take on issues related to girls in their community. Be it getting girls to school or residential centers or complex issues of sexuality, the women's collectives are a space in which these efforts or issues can be discussed and negotiated. Nonetheless, women's collectives can dominate and constrain girls' collectives, and it is critical to ensure that there are separate spaces for both. The areas of tension and difference that organization staff members highlighted during the research interviews are centered on issues of sexuality and those of choice. At times, structural and economic conditions bear down differently on women and girls.

The organizations visited for this study make a distinction between working with mothers and working with women's collectives. Working with mothers is part of their trust-building process, a strategy to build support for adolescent girls within the family and community, and there are particular activities for this. There is clarity that within the family structure, the adolescent girl is lower in the power hierarchy than women, and there are limits to what can be achieved in the mother-daughter relationship. However, the relationship with women's collectives draws on a more

shared vision of claiming citizenship and space in the public realm. Girls' collectives are aligning and supporting campaigns on sexual harassment, the right to public spaces and equal wages as the means to be part of processes to claim citizenship.

Additionally, in the case of larger, organized women's collectives, women members intervene to greater effect than field workers in promoting education for girls or in handling other mothers in their village on issues related to their daughters.

Adolescence is an age when sexuality is an area of anxiety and concern for both families and the community. Norms related to mobility, dress and social interactions are monitored, and marriage looms over communities, both young and older members. Grass-roots groups need to negotiate this contested terrain, without explicitly stating it as their mandate. Direct intervention on behalf of girls and on their issues is not pursued by organizations. These girls are legally not adults, and any intervention that has the potential of leading to a girl leaving the family means sending her to state-run child protection homes. This is not desired because these institutions are rife with all manner of irregularities, and the risk of sexual abuse is high. This is a big difference from the manner in which adult women can access grass-roots groups to intervene in their cases within the family. They can choose to stay in short-term centers or in any of the arrangements that NGOs provide of their own will because they are adults. But girls (younger than 18) do not have this option and are taken into state custody.

Even in cases related to early marriage or choice of marriage, organizations visited for this study avoid addressing these issues publicly. Some groups conduct public campaigns to spread awareness on the issue, but handling specific cases puts them in direct confrontation with a community. It is well known that while the State officially views early marriage as a crime, the local state, represented by the police, is empathetic to the family and community. As a result, any action on a case is identified not with the state agencies but with the local group that becomes the target of anger and resentment. As a result, groups work covertly on this issue. Where there are strong women's collectives, this work is important to prevent early marriage at the community level.

Women's collectives provide a buffer to deal with issues and bring action on issues, such as early marriage and sexual and

reproductive health. Organizations cannot intervene in these areas without the support of women's collectives. Eventually, it is only the women's collectives that will stand by girls' decisions; thus, the tension is productive and positive also. Girls' collectives push the women's collectives to question their own positions on these issues.

Why collectives for adolescent girls?

The way organizations collectivize girls – with an agenda to transform their lives – is a departure from the way in which women have been collectivized. Throughout the research for this study, field staff and interviewed experts emphasized that the manner of working with girls is radically different from working with women. “The way in which you express or raise issues with girls is really at the heart of the matter,” was a comment repeated in multiple ways.

What this points to is the process of working simultaneously on the sense of self while linking adolescent girls to the larger world in a safe space – their collective or forum. And this is what results in the transformative element.

Organizations combine knowledge, skills and opportunities in the practices of collective action to make it an empowering experience for young girls. Discussions, theatre, exposure trips, photography, computers, sporting events, etc. are not merely about building skills, abilities and certification but also about building social capital. The sense of self-worth emerges from creating new identities (such as being known as the “Vacha girls” or a member of a *cheli sangha*) and an engagement with new ideas, vocabularies and domains. The collective provides the possibility of both enabling girls who are unable to voice their experiences to listen to their peers and bridging them out of their caste, kin and class identities to new domains.

The study highlights mobility as an outcome of building the social capital of girls and bridging them into new structures, institutions and spaces (in terms of physical access, intellectual engagements and role in communities). The idea of mobility is critical for an age group that is in transition, in ways that are different from how mobility has been articulated by women. For adolescent girls, it is not only a matter of physical mobility but includes social and cultural mobility, fantasy and identity in which many arenas of their lives are involved. Being part of networks, teamwork and forms of interactions (being a mentor or a co-counselor, for instance) creates a sense of mobility that is important to their phase of transition.

Work with adolescent girls often focuses excessively on individual growth and identity. Individual journeys of girls can be dramatic and empowering. The projection of girls as role models is part of a narrative that promotes the idea of agency and motivation against all odds, often sidelining the deep structures and hierarchies that determine girls' choices. These can be read as experiences of girls moving out of bonding social capital and bridging out to new networks and associations. Collectives ensure that the relationship between the individual and the social structures they are part of are transformed. As a result, collectives are critical to social change.

The current policy of organizing adolescent girls, however, remains marred by statistical interests and an aim to reach large numbers of girls as recipients rather than empowering them to explore their rights as human beings beyond an economic asset or reproductive responsibility.

Nonetheless, collective action in the form of clubs, classes, courses, forums, networks or informal gatherings is still a powerful force and critical strategy for working with adolescent girls. At the least, collective action helps adolescents (both girls and boys) find support in understanding themselves as individuals and citizens and in making the oftentimes-confusing transition to adulthood.

Leadership building: Learning to hold power

In many collectives, there is greater focus on the external targets that are to do with transforming society. Internal work related to the structure, form and design of the forums and collectives is weak. Where organizations have invested time and energy in this work, a strong collective of adolescent girls who are able to voice their own priorities as a group and to hold their own with other collectives has resulted. This internal work in the collective is also critical to hand over the history and context of the group to new members. This is a transitory, changing group, in which members leave over a period of three to five years. Collectives with strong internal structures provide the scaffolding for new members to enter and stay and for older members to move into new roles. Creating stronger internal structures can strengthen young people to take on issues of choice, early marriage and those related to sexuality more effectively. Strong youth collectives have raised these issues from a greater position of strength than a handful of NGO workers. The collective engagement moves away from viewing these

issues as individual events or aberrations and creates the potential to challenge them at a structural level.

For instance, in the case of the leadership community program in Mumbai, many groups come together to strengthen girls' leadership practices. The network of groups thus provides greater visibility to the shared agenda that the girls bring. Leadership development through the creation of networks and federations of adolescent girls need to be created and supported, which is a different level of collective from the ones that organizations create at the local level.¹³

Statistics and data establish the scale of gender inequality that exists on the ground, but they cannot become the drivers for social transformation. For social transformation to occur in adolescent girls' lives, a deeper understanding of how gender inequality can be challenged is necessary. Until the vision of interventions for adolescent girls ceases to regard them as objects or recipients of certain development needs or to be better mothers and wives – social change cannot happen. The vision needs to be of girls as future citizens and rights holders of rights. Then the processes of work (taking on board both their practical and strategic interests) become different in nature.

Tracking exclusion

The most disempowered group that emerged through the course of interactions with different groups was that of married young women. They were the most difficult to include in young women's collectives. The demands on their time both by their husbands, who are also keen to control their mobility and the in-laws' claims on their time makes mobilization of this group most challenging.

Girls who have dropped out of school also are more vulnerable in terms of being excluded from forums and opportunities for inputs. Girls in school are the most likely participants included.

Work with boys and young men is critical in transforming ideas related to masculinity and femininity that recreate inequalities. At the same time, while mixed forums create possibilities of new cultures of interaction, it is important to be mindful of the fact that boys learn to provide space

to adolescent girls to lead and determine their agendas. It is also important for girls to experience holding power that comes from their own space, networks and knowledge, new relationships and leadership.

A glaring and necessary gap to be filled in the context of work on collective action with female youth is a more holistic understanding of transitions that young girls make in different contexts of caste, class and religion. There is a need for more longitudinal studies that map journeys of both individual adolescent girls and the collectives that they are part of, to understand the links between the possibilities and challenges that collectivizing adolescent girls encompasses.

¹³ Batliwala (2013) provided a useful categorization for organizations supporting the creation and sustenance of collectives. Member-serving organizations are ones that bring together groups to create a structure and govern themselves, like the Mumbai groups have done for the leadership community collective. There is also need for other-serving organizations that are autonomous and have skills and resources to build collectives from the outside. The different forms of support necessitated by collectives are often not seen as part of the work of collective building; yet, they are central to long-term and sustained collectives.

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ANNEX: RESEARCH INFORMANTS

Organizations

1. **Akshara**, Mumbai, in Maharashtra State
2. **CORO**, in Maharashtra State
3. **Vacha**, Mumbai, in Maharashtra State
4. **Voice 4 Girls** in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh/ Telangana State
5. **Mahila Samakhya** in Andhra Pradesh/ Telangana State
6. **Mohammad Bazar Backward Classes Development Society (MBBCDS)** in Birbhum District of West Bengal State
7. **Sankalp** in Kota District of Rajasthan State

In-depth interviews were carried out with 27 staff officers from the above organizations. Focus group discussions were carried out with a total of 80 women leaders and 105 girls in grassroots collectives associated with these organizations.

Key informants

1. Kameshwari Jhandalya, independent consultant, Education Research Unit, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh
2. Ishita Chaudhary, Director, YP Foundation, Delhi
3. Usha Chaudhary, Head, Vikalp, Udaipur, Rajasthan
4. Trupti Shah and Reshma Vohra, staff members, Sahiyar (Stree Sangathan), Vadodara, Gujarat
5. Shabina Mumtaz, Leader, Vanangana, Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh
6. Hasina Khan, independent activist, Mumbai, Maharashtra
7. Prasanthi, State Project Director, Mahila Samakhya, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh
8. Hameeda Khatoon and Aisha Khatoon, members, Sanatkada Samajik Pahal, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh
9. Rehana Adib, Head, Astitva, Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh