



ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA

The Promise of Collectivizing Girls

GENDER INEQUALITY: THE ROOT OF MANY GLOBAL PROBLEMS

Around the world, gender inequality continues to harm women and girls. Systemic discrimination and entrenched social norms limit their opportunities and freedom, while increasing their risk for a host of bad outcomes.

Women are two-thirds of the world's labor force, but own only 1% of the world's wealth



23% of elected representatives are women



77% are men



70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner



CONTROL OF GIRLS' CHOICES AND SEXUALITY: FUELING CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA

In India—the second most populous country in the world—child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) remains one of the most concerning manifestations of gender inequality, despite decades-old laws against the practice.

Communities view marriage as the most important goal girls can aspire to, while entrenched structural barriers restrict women and girls' access to higher education and well-paying jobs. CEFM deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives and bodies, both before and after marriage.

Often, communities in India see girls' chastity as a reflection of her family's honor. Fearful of the consequences of girls acting on their own desires or experiencing sexual violence, some parents isolate their teenage daughters at home—limiting their access to sexual health information, school, friends, work and public life—and arrange the girls' marriages as quickly as possible.

In 2015, the United Nations made reducing gender inequality and ending CEFM part of their Sustainable Development Goals, which will shape international development priorities until 2030.

1,500,000 GIRLS

in India marry before age 18, often without their consent. India has the highest number of underage brides in the world.



1 in 4 married women in India do not get to participate in decisions about their own healthcare



of women are in the workforce, compared to an average of 50% globally

HALF of women

cannot go alone to a market or a health facility



COLLECTIVES: EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS TO CHANGE THEIR LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to address gender inequality and CEFM, empowering women and girls in India through a unique strategy focused on supporting collectives of women and girls.

Collectivizing refers to regularly bringing together members of marginalized groups in ways that enable them to identify mechanisms of oppression and strategize for both individual and social change. In collectives, members:

- Create safe spaces to seek emotional support and discuss their lives
- Learn about shared challenges related to their human rights, with a focus on gender and sexuality
- Experience shifts in perspective and develop new skills
- Develop their individual abilities to negotiate and to make decisions about their own lives and bodies
- Take political action together toward common goals for social change

**140,000
MEMBERS**

Global research shows that supporting and nurturing autonomous, grassroots feminist organizations is a critical mechanism for advancing women's rights around the globe. In addition, AJWS-supported research into the processes and potential of collectives in India suggests that they are among the best methods for supporting girls to confront the social norms and discrimination that limit their decisions about their own lives and bodies.

In India, AJWS supports:

**34 GRANTEE
ORGANIZATIONS**

3,500 COLLECTIVES



OUR SUPPORT FOR COLLECTIVES: REACHING THE MOST MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

In India, AJWS supports over 34 grantee organizations that work with approximately 3,500 collectives with a total of over 140,000 members.

MORE THAN **3,000** COLLECTIVES REACH OVER **126,000** WOMEN AND GIRLS

- 25% of the collectives work exclusively with adolescent girls
- 42% of the collectives work exclusively with women

But because collectives spark social change—as opposed to only providing services—their reach goes far beyond this number. As individual members share what they have learned with their families and communities, they have the potential to change hearts and minds on a massive scale.



MORE THAN **1,600** COLLECTIVES
ENGAGE OVER **95,500** HARD-TO-REACH,
VULNERABLE MEMBERS

- 
- Married young women (2,316 members)
 - Out-of-school girls (6,800 members)
 - Women from disadvantaged castes, tribes or religious groups (35,286 members)
 - People living with disabilities (461 members)

MORE THAN **532** COLLECTIVES
REACH OVER **13,500** MEN AND BOYS



PERSONAL TO POLITICAL: HOW COLLECTIVES BUILD ACTIVE CITIZENS

AJWS-supported collectives in India work on a wide range of activities designed to engage and empower members to combat gender inequality and other challenges in their lives and communities.

Typically, collective members first exercise greater power in their personal lives. They also begin influencing others in their family and community, sparking social change. Eventually, drawing on their growing collective

power, members work together to demand political change—shaping new laws, policies or services.

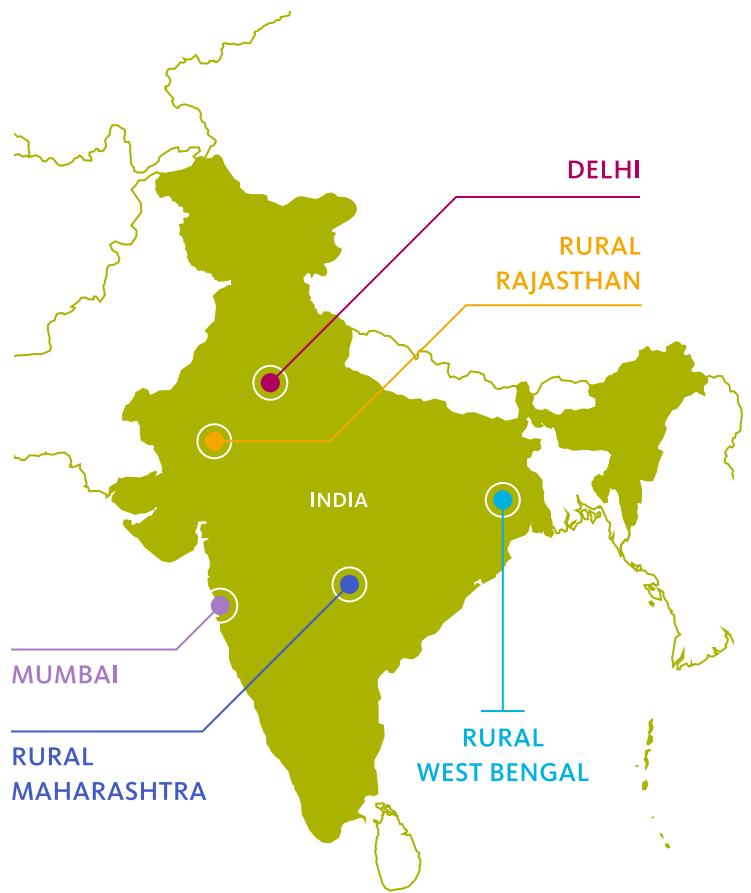
While many global development programs have focused on getting large numbers of girls to attend activities or classes, collectives encourage girls to develop their own insights and goals—and empower them to act as agents of change in their own lives and communities.



IMPACT OF COLLECTIVES: SPARKING INDIVIDUAL & SOCIAL CHANGE

While many global development experts have focused on increasing the age at which girls marry, AJWS-supported research has found that this is not enough to successfully empower girls. Instead, our grantees address the limits placed on girls' agency and aspirations in life, as well as the availability of critical services—such as high-quality education—and girls' access to those services.

Ultimately, AJWS believes in confronting the root causes of CEFM, enabling girls to make decisions about their lives and to pursue opportunities beyond early marriage. We are dedicated to measuring what matters and conducting research on incremental pathways to lasting change.



At collectives supported by AJWS, girls and young women are...

- Gaining the confidence and social support they need for their mental health and well-being—and to successfully pursue futures of their own choosing



RURAL WEST BENGAL

At 14, Sonali Khatun found the courage to insist on breaking off a marriage she did not want. But as gossip about her swirled around her rural village, she fell into a suicidal depression. She found a new sense of purpose and connection through a young women's collective at MBBCDS, where she learned she was not alone in her struggle to cope with her community's rigid expectations of girls' behavior.

- Accessing crucial information about their sexual health and rights



- Negotiating for their rights and challenging stereotypes about what girls should do with their lives and bodies



- Pursuing education, training and employment opportunities that once seemed out of reach to girls



- Learning how to lead in their communities and participating in public spaces



RURAL MAHARASHTRA

Through MASUM, Shital Waikar gained access to information about human sexuality and her own body that her mother—married at age 14—never got. This information helped her dispel a common belief that she should be ashamed of her period and avoid entering temples while menstruating. Today, Shital volunteers with MASUM to educate other young people about their sexual health and rights.

MUMBAI

When Rukhsar Javed Sayyed started taking English classes at Awaaz-e-Niswaan, her mother was pressuring her to get married. Most girls in her conservative neighborhood expected marriage and motherhood as they neared the end of their teenage years—and the simple act of leaving their homes to attend Awaaz activities felt radical. But Rukhsar's experience at Awaaz emboldened her to confront her mother and insist on completing college.

DELHI

As a teenager, Khushi Prajapati faced the likely prospect of an unwanted, early marriage—and a lifetime of poverty. Azad Foundation's "Women on Wheels" program helped her steer her life in a new direction as a taxi driver. Khushi broke into a profitable, traditionally all-male profession and greatly increased her income—enabling her to say "no" whenever her family brought up marriage.

RURAL RAJASTHAN

At 23, Manju Kumari is already a sarpanch, the elected head of her rural village. With support from The Hunger Project, Manju is developing the leadership skills she needs to make a difference. So far, she has launched new public services to meet the needs of adolescent girls—including a center where they can meet, study and play sports.

ABOUT US

American Jewish World Service is investing \$30 million over six years to advance gender equality in India. This critical work is made possible by support from The Kendeda Fund. Our partners help girls make informed decisions about their own lives—and break through society's limiting beliefs about what they can accomplish.

AJWS is the leading global Jewish organization working to pursue justice and fight poverty in the developing world. By supporting hundreds of social change organizations in 19 countries, we respond to the most pressing issues of our time.

To learn more about our partners' research in India, visit ajws.org/research or contact us at EmergingEvidence@ajws.org.

Front cover: Sonali Khatun (front right, in blue) leads a procession of young women and girls through her village in rural West Bengal. Sonali and her friends from MBBCDS stage educational skits about human rights for the local community, encouraging reflection on issues they care about—such as the importance of giving girls choices and opportunities beyond early marriage and motherhood.

Photographs of AJWS grantees in India by Jonathan Torgovnik.



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