



EMERGING EVIDENCE

How Young People in Maharashtra Negotiate Change Amid Restrictive Social Norms

BACKGROUND

Young people around the world face challenges brought about by unequal access to resources and opportunities. These challenges particularly impact youth in India, a country with the largest number of young people in the world.

Various social, cultural, financial and ideological restraints hold young people in India back from making their own choices and achieving their aspirations. Gender and caste attitudes often set specific, strict expectations for youth. For example, many youth in India face family and community pressure to enter early, arranged marriages. In poor, rural areas, many have little access to mobile phones and the internet, and young women often have limited freedom to leave their homes. These restrictions frequently lead to anger and frustration among young people.



Youth volunteers from MASUM hold a rally for gender equality in their community. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik

In 2016, Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM)—a community-based human rights organization that works with adolescent girls and boys in rural Maharashtra—conducted research to better understand how social norms were affecting the perspectives and decisions of the youth living there.

RESEARCH GOALS

- Understand how social norms are formed in the Purandar Block of Pune District in Maharashtra, India
- Explore which norms (related to gender, caste, religion) most shape young people's attitudes and abilities to achieve their aspirations in this region
- Determine how an organization working from a feminist human rights perspective can help nurture progressive values (social justice, democracy, etc.) in this area of Maharashtra
- Measure the impact of MASUM's three-day residential camps for youth in Purandar

METHODOLOGY

- Site: Purandar Block, Maharashtra, India
- Purposive sampling: 106 participants (59 women and 47 men) including staff, participants in MASUM activities and other youth who had or had not chosen to make unconventional life decisions
- Data collection: 13 focus group discussions and individual questionnaires with 75 youth age 16 to 26; in-depth interviews with 31 people age 20 and older

HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS

Impact of Social Norms

- Gender and caste social norms have a major impact on youth.
 - Gender norms: Devalue household work while cementing it as a woman's role; suggest women should lack mobility and financial, political and employment rights; condone violence against women; restrict remarriage for divorced or widowed women
 - Caste norms: Link caste and poverty; support rampant discrimination based on caste hierarchy; prohibit inter-caste friendships and marriages
- These social norms are changing, but not in predictable ways.

Emerging Evidence is a series of short summaries of research that American Jewish World Service (AJWS) supports as part of our strategy to advance gender equality and end child, early and forced (CEFM) marriage in India.

The study described here, "An Enquiry into How Young People Negotiate Change in Their Lives Amid Restrictive Social Values and Other Challenges," was produced by Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM).

- More progressive attitudes and increased opportunities seem to be available to urban, but not rural, youth.
- Compared to women, men are questioning existing norms and feel that changes in gender roles are more noticeable—especially men who have attended MASUM activities.
- Men are less likely than women to endorse women leaving violent situations at home. More men feel that the violent party has the right to an opportunity to reform.
- Participants from marginalized castes have a more nuanced understanding of caste-based discrimination.
- MASUM camps positively influence progressive attitudes toward gender and caste norms. Those who have attended three or more camps report the most progressive attitudes.

Youth Aspirations and Needs for Support

- Youth have a range of hopes and dreams for their futures.
 - They seek: family support for their goals, higher education, prestigious or well-paid career, independent choice of wife or husband
- Girls tend to respond with holistic aspirations rather than specific goals (example: be a role model).
- Girls are less likely than boys to report receiving support to achieve their aspirations.
- Youth harbor a strong desire for varied support from their peers, family and community, including:
 - Parental support: open communication and dialogue, emotional support (especially when failing), financial support, moral guidance
 - Educational support: coaching, access to information, knowledge and resources, extracurricular activities, financial support (beyond family's means), career networks and employment opportunities, guidance on making educational decisions
 - Peer support: reduction of peer pressure to use drugs or alcohol (boys specifically), friendship and dialogue, emotional support (especially listening), less isolation at home and more interaction (girls specifically)
- Youth who have made unconventional decisions that break with social norms also report having external support from family, other mentors (NGO staff) or peers.

- Youth exposed to human rights education express an increased ability to identify and try to stop discrimination.

Obstacles to Fulfilling Aspirations

- Most important: poverty and living in a rural area (lack of resources and infrastructure)
- Gender and caste discrimination
- Early marriage (lack of choice of partner, end of educational opportunities)
- Restrictions on friendship with members of the opposite sex
- Domestic violence at home, lack of parental trust and lack of general freedom
- Sexual harassment in public spaces and lack of safe, easy transportation options

Consequences

- While many youth still express their agency and negotiate with restrictive social norms and other obstacles to achieving their aspirations, many struggle with:
 - Poor mental health (feeling trapped, smothered, depressed, anxious)
 - Loss of interest in people and activities that used to engage them
 - Running away from home, self-harm, fights, theft, substance abuse, suicide

CONCLUSION

Young people in India today are caught in a paradoxical situation—often faced with many more options and choices than their parents ever had, yet unable to fully access these options due to a variety of constraints.

MASUM is using the results of this study to develop and refine its interventions with young people in Purandar Block, to better meet young people's needs and maximize positive impact on their attitudes, aspirations and progressive beliefs. For example, MASUM plans to increase its efforts to support youth mental health, address substance abuse and facilitate parent-child dialogue about difficult topics.

Visit ajws.org/research for more insights on CEFM and gender inequality—in India and around the globe. For questions or to sign up for updates on AJWS research, email EmergingEvidence@ajws.org.

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