



EMERGING EVIDENCE

Mapping the Impact of a Girls' Empowerment Program in Mumbai



With help from AJWS grantee The Hunger Project, these young women are challenging traditional ideas of what women can do with their lives. The Hunger Project is setting up new services for girls throughout their community—and inspiring them to pursue new opportunities, instead of conforming to social pressures to marry young and begin having children as soon as possible. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik. *This photo was not taken as part of the research described in this report.*

BACKGROUND

Based in Mumbai, the Akshara Centre's Empowering Dreams Program evolved out of a belief in girls' capacity to grow, their right to equal access to opportunities and their capacity to contribute to social change. Through this program, girls from low socioeconomic backgrounds learn a variety of skills that enable them to access and complete higher education and navigate life in Mumbai as self-sufficient women. The program features a range of activities, including English and computer classes; financial management lessons; workshops on gender equality, communications and self-defense; leadership training; field trips; and participation in advocacy campaigns. The Mapping Change project, published in 2019, documents how past participants experienced the program and how their lives changed as a result.

RESEARCH GOALS

- Gain a deeper understanding of the program's impact (beyond data already collected through ongoing feedback forms, interviews and pre- and post-program questionnaires)

- Identify ways to increase the program's positive impact on the lives of young women

METHODOLOGY

- Feminist participatory evaluation
 - Grounded in principles of inclusion, collaboration and debate
- Sample: 19 girls and young women (age 17 to 21) who had participated in Akshara's programs for at least two years
 - Represent diverse castes, religions
 - All first-generation college learners from underprivileged backgrounds
- Participatory data collection and analysis
 - Methods: photo journals, writing and storytelling, visioning exercises, focus group discussions, in-depth personal interviews
 - Goal: assess how girls' empowerment changed across several domains: self, family and the society or public spaces girls navigate

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 marriage and unions (CEFMU).

The study summarized here, "[Girls Map Change: A Girl-Led Experiment to Measure Program Impact](#)," was produced by the Ashkara Centre.

HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS

Akshara's Empowering Dreams Program demonstrated a pathway in which girls' empowerment builds in phases over time. The interventions had an important impact on girls' lives.

SELF

Increased Self-Confidence and Understanding of Gender

- Young women reported gaining confidence and an ability to voice their thoughts and feelings in and outside their homes.
- They learned about human rights and legal rights; dialogued about experiences of gender inequality; and reflected on how gender norms had constrained them in the context of their own lives.
- Young women were critical about taboos related to natural phenomena, like menstruation, but hesitated to transgress their family's deeply held beliefs. They said they wouldn't challenge norms in their parent's homes, but they would in their own homes.

Increased Aspirations

- Young women had a practical take on their dreams that accounted for both their passions and their need to survive economically (e.g., being a poet and a teacher). They expressed a desire to break into a middle-class lifestyle.
- They said their options were determined by finances, their parents' wishes, and gender norms.
- Their dreams were stymied by many factors, such as a lack of good grades, the high cost of professional courses, and a negative body image.

FAMILY

- Young women reported facing constant conflict with their parents if they attempted to make independent choices regarding their hobbies, entertainment, careers, boyfriends, or housework. The constant negotiation took a toll on their mental health.
- They engaged in multiple negotiation strategies: coming up with alternatives; asking for something they knew parents would reject to make another goal seem less objectionable by comparison (e.g., asking to cut hair short to ultimately get permission to keep long hair untied); delaying rather than objecting a request completely (e.g., postponing marriage until after her education is complete). They developed an understanding of when to negotiate, with whom and how.

PUBLIC NETWORKS AND SPACES

- Akshara workshops provided communities of support where young women shared confidences. The workshops also gave them opportunities to engage in public spaces and decreased their fears of going against gender norms (e.g., women are not supposed to travel or interact with strangers).
- This newfound ability to network shows that young women are building bases of emotional and informational support outside of their traditional family groups.
- The young women increased their mobility for practical needs first, like going to school or running errands, which often led to more mobility for extracurricular reasons—but the latter was harder to obtain and required more strategic negotiation (e.g., informing parents on location).
- Participating in social action campaigns has a major impact on young women. All participants said that they had become more communicative, shed their inhibitions and taken leadership positions as a result.

CONCLUSION

Akshara's programs had a positive impact on the participants' empowerment, especially on their self-confidence and ability to negotiate. Participants acquired strong new networks and got involved in social actions that transformed them. The program offered an effective pathway to change that started with workshops and led to social action.

“They are on the road to empowerment, stepping forward and sometimes backward as they learn to speak out, resist, compromise and challenge.”

– The Ashkara Team

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