

Engaging adolescent girls in a sports-based programme to challenge norms in their communities

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What is the issue?

Worldwide, harmful gender norms are structural barriers to the health and development of adolescent girls. In India, restrictions on girls' liberty to move freely in public spaces contribute to school dropout and early marriage, and negatively affect girls' health and wellbeing, from adolescence into adulthood. Produced by patriarchal power relations, norms are maintained, in part, by self-surveillance, as girls perform internalised gender 'scripts'. According to the 'performance theory' of gender, girls learn to perform gender roles and adopt gender identities that 'regulate' social interactions and limit options including the freedom to move and be visible in public space.^{1,2,3} Gender-related scripts have been found to be more significant than either economic rationales or women's empowerment in explaining variations in age at marriage across India.⁴ It is the visible display of gender in day-to-day social interactions that allows neighbours and communities to police women's actions. The anticipation of social sanctions or rewards, with the need for belonging and approval from the group, is one of the key motivators for compliance.⁵

Parivartan for Girls was implemented in Shivaji Nagar, one of Mumbai's largest urban slums. The community here consists predominantly of Muslim migrant families from northern India working in the unorganised sector and facing multiple structural inequalities. Public spaces are dominated by men and, especially after menarche, girls' mobility and visibility are restricted, as is their interaction with boys. Popular discourse associates women's safety with the modesty of her clothing. As custodians of family honour, girls are socialised to fear not only potential violence in public spaces but also the threat of public censure that will impact her 'reputation'.⁶ The fear of sexual harassment maintains male privilege, diminishes women's feelings of safety and belonging in public places and restricts their freedom of movement.⁷ Fear and social control significantly limit girls' individual agency to access public space, a structural barrier in any intervention aiming to increase female education and participation as citizens in society.

Summary

Harmful gender norms act as a major hurdle in the development of adolescent girls and young women in India. The Parivartan programme engaged with adolescent girls in a sports programme, challenging the strong norm that "sports is a boys' thing" and demonstrating that change is possible. The role-model approach helped girls and young women to claim public space and this resulted in increased mobility and visibility.

Showcasing these research findings from STRIVE partner the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)'s Parivartan programme has made it evident to other NGOs, programme organisations and institutions that sports can be a strong tool to challenge gender norms. Several sports for development programmes have been conceptualised and implemented since Parivartan.

What did STRIVE research find?

In evaluating Parivartan for Girls, we learned that:

- Sport provides a feasible platform for addressing gender norms, even in a slum community where girls have no role models, no aspirations for careers and no sense of collective power
- Sport alone is not sufficient; the programme must involve a carefully designed process of learning and reflection on social expectations and personal aspirations
- Recruiting and training educated young women from within the community as mentors to implement the programme provided role models parents could relate to
- Fostering collective agency can be important/ effective in cultivating the individual agency of girls and young women to contest restrictive social norms

The programme enhanced the agency of the young women mentors to strategise and negotiate greater freedom and visibility in their community, taking risks

as a group first, with collective agency an important step towards greater individual agency. With the introduction of a new reference group, the mentors, into the community and with the support of families, came a greater appreciation for the education of girls.

The study

A sports-based programme with adolescent girls aged 12 to 16 in a slum community in Mumbai, India, Parivartan for Girls was designed to increase adolescent girls' self-esteem, self-confidence and educational aspirations while addressing entrenched norms against women's use of public space. The evaluation found that the programme achieved shifts in the norms that restrict the public mobility of post-menarche girls, constrain their education and future options and reinforce gender inequality. The programme recruited young women from within the slum community to serve as 'mentors' to younger girls. The mentors were trained to lead reflection sessions on gender and to coach *kabaddi*, a contact team sport. Over the course of 15 months, the mentors delivered a carefully structured programme of life skills and gender training to younger girls, interspersed with weekly games of *kabaddi*. To perform their responsibilities, mentors needed to challenge mobility restrictions and negotiate their visibility in public space, a process that yields important lessons for practice.

Apnalaya, a grassroots NGO with longstanding presence and credibility in the community, implemented the intervention.

ICRW's Asia Regional Office (ICRW Asia) designed the programme and conducted the research, as part of the STRIVE research consortium. They applied social norms theory to shape the programme and to analyse findings.

How did STRIVE research achieve impact?

To achieve impact, ICRW Asia built on a strong reputation and portfolio of related work, including the GEMS Initiative (Gender Equity Movement in Schools) and Parivartan: Coaching Boys in to Men. From this basis, ICRW Asia achieved impact by continued engagement with established and new networks on sports and gender norms, and by creating and taking up opportunities to present the Parivartan for Girls study at every stage from design through to dissemination of results, at community events, meetings and conferences.

A series of blogs on influential platforms included:

- Das, M. **Blog on new exciting developments in the Parivartan Program.** <http://blog.icrw.org/beyond-project-boundaries-parivartan-mentors-being-part-of-community-vigilance-group/>
- Das, M; Abramsky, T. **Wrestling for Equality.** <http://blog.icrw.org/wrestling-for-equality/>

Presentations at conferences included:

- Shweta Bankar presented on '**Challenging traditional scripts for girls and breaking down gender stereotypes: Community Engagement**' at a conference organised by KHPT on 'Keeping Girls in School' (Dharwad, Karnataka, July 2015).

Young athletes compete in a public *kabaddi* tournament at the end of the Parivartan programme



Table 1: Impact of Parivartan for Girls on other programmes and studies

PROGRAMME	ORGANISATION	OBJECTIVE	REACH	IMPACT OF PARIVARTAN
Skillz Plus (2012–2014)	Grassroot Soccer	To improve confidence, acceptance of HIV status, adherence to ARVs, and regulate follow-up with clinic visits.		As a result of a STRIVE-funded exchange with ICRW Asia, Grassroots Soccer adopted a gender framework in its work with adolescents
PAnKH, Dholpur district of Rajasthan, India (2014–2018)	ICRW Asia	To develop and integrated a safe spaces model to engage unmarried and married adolescent girls, their parents, community, schools health system and other key stakeholders	6,500 unmarried and married adolescent girls aged 12–19	Sports for development was leveraged as a key tool for the social mobilisation of girls, as a strategy to increase girls’ peer network and to challenge the social norms around the restricted mobility of girls in public spaces beyond the household. The sports component was used to engage girls through a physical activity which brings them into the public spaces
New sports-based programme (July 2019)	Ashta No Kai	To encourage girls to continue their education and delay age at marriage	600 adolescent girls	Sports component to encourage adolescent girls to claim public space and challenge gender norms
Samata, Bijapur and Bagalkot districts of Karnataka, India (2012–2019)	KHPT	To keep girls in school and delay age at marriage	3,600 adolescent girls	Conceptualisation of the gender framework to work with adolescent girls and use of the Parivartan curriculum – a highly prized element of the Samata programme
Khula Asma, Mumbai, India (2014–2019)	Apnalaya	To enhance opportunities for girls to access public space, enable them to become active citizens and encourage them to continue formal education, delay age of marriage and overcome restrictions due to patriarchy	432 adolescent girls aged 12–18 years and 29 young women aged 18–25	Learning Life skills through playing Kabaddi. The sport was a game changer in itself as a contact sport conventionally played by boys helped girls challenge the status quo. Two athletes from the Parivartan programme are now mentors with the Khula Asman programme
UMANG, Godda and Jamtara districts of Jharkhand, India (2018–2022)	ICRW Asia	To delay age at marriage by improving agency and aspirations of girls to continue in education and empower them towards achieving life goals such as education attainment and career	16,000 adolescent girls and their community and family members	Sports for development and other Parivartan learnings and methods/ tools to institute sports program for girls to empower adolescent girls and reduce child marriages

- Speaking about the **Parivartan for Girls study**, Madhumita Das presented two papers at the Girl Power at Play symposium (Ottawa, June 2015) organised by Women Deliver, UNICEF, Right To Play, One Goal, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).
- Shweta Bankar presented the outcomes of the Parivartan for Girls study **‘Increasing aspirations, challenging restrictive norms: Results from Parivartan, a sports-based Kabaddi program with adolescent girls in a slum community in Mumbai, India’** at the Conference organised by International Association for Adolescent Health (New Delhi, 2017).

“Parivartan programme stands out among the flagship programmes of ICRW to engage adolescent girls to increase their agency and aspirations by demonstrating how sports as a means of development can engage girls, their mothers, fathers and communities in beginning to challenge and change unequal social norms that foster gender-based discrimination. The programme presents a tested model of how to engage girls for increasing their access to public spaces and pathways of how they negotiate for it within families and communities.”

HEMLATA VERMA, CO-ORDINATOR PANKH PROGRAMME, RAJASTHAN, INDIA

Impact

The programme had impact on practices in the community during the course of the evaluation, achieving, for instance, a district-level shift in community monitoring of police. Within a few months of ICRW Asia rolling out Parivartan, three mentors (young women leaders) from this programme were selected for Dakshata Committee, part of a district ‘Social Security Cell’ tasked with ensuring that police responses to violence against women are appropriate.

Learning from STRIVE Parivartan Plus has impacted the conceptualisation and implementation of a number of sport-based programmes and studies. (See Table 1)

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Suggested citation

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Next steps

ICRW Asia’s plans to extend the impact of Parivartan for Girls include the following steps:

- presenting evidence to national programmes such as Khelo India
- engaging with relevant organisations, such as the Naaz Foundation, to form a Sports for Development Consortium at the Mumbai City level

“Parivartan was pivotal in firming up our idea that when girls step put to play a number of barriers begin to break. For girls to have an access to a corner of a playground, otherwise monopolised by boys and men, is nothing less than claiming a piece of their skies. What else does childhood mean? The denial of personhood begins from the denial of childhood.”

ARUN KUMAR, CEO, APNALAYA, MUMBAI, INDIA

STRIVE PUBLICATIONS

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STRIVE research consortium

A DFID-funded research programme consortium, STRIVE is led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, with six key research partners in Tanzania, South Africa, India and the USA. STRIVE provides new insights and evidence into how different structural factors – including gender inequality and violence, poor livelihood options, stigma, and problematic alcohol use – influence HIV vulnerability and undermine the effectiveness of the HIV response.

