

Sabala: Keeping adolescent girls in school



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What is Sabala?

Sabala is a programme to improve the quality of life of adolescent girls from marginalised communities in northern Karnataka, India, by keeping girls in school, delaying marriage, and reducing entry into sex work. Reaching 3,600 adolescent girls from 1,800 families in 119 villages and 69 high schools, Sabala aims to increase the proportion of adolescent girls who:

- enter formal secondary education (from 7th to 8th Standards)
- complete 10th Standard
- delay marriage until after 10th Standard
- delay their sexual debut until after 10th Standard

Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT) is implementing Sabala from July 2013 to 2017, in partnership with the Government of Karnataka and the World Bank. During this period, STRIVE partners KHPT and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) are evaluating Sabala's impact on adolescent girls' high school entry and retention, as well as on their vulnerability to HIV.

Context

Rates of HIV infection in northern Karnataka are among the highest in India.¹ Adolescent girls who do not complete their education are particularly vulnerable to HIV and other health risks. In northern Karnataka, many girls drop out of school as a result of poverty, early marriage, a tradition of sex work and the under-valuing of girls' education.

In 2006, 89% of households from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC/ST) in Bagalkot and 42% of all households in Bijapur lived below the poverty line.² Among SC/ST girls, 53% in Bagalkot and 38% in Bijapur married before the age of 18.³⁻⁵ Over 70% of female sex workers from northern Karnataka are from SC/ST communities and enter into sex work before 18 years of age. Most are initiated into sex work as part of the *devadasi* tradition.⁶

Sex work ends these girls' education at an early age and fuels their migration to brothels in the neighbouring state of Maharashtra.⁷ Meanwhile, gender and social norms limit girls' mobility, aspirations, self-esteem and participation in decision-making.⁸

Rationale

Why design and test a programme to keep girls in school until 10th Standard? Evidence shows that girls who complete high school have better health and life options than those who drop out.

A GIRL WHO DROPS OUT OF SCHOOL ...

is more vulnerable to HIV infection and other health problems⁹⁻¹¹

will have a larger, less healthy family⁹⁻¹¹

earns less than better educated girls⁹⁻¹¹

together with all girls dropping out, costs India \$30 billion in lost annual growth¹²

lacks voice and agency and is disengaged from larger community issues

A GIRL WHO COMPLETES HIGH SCHOOL ...

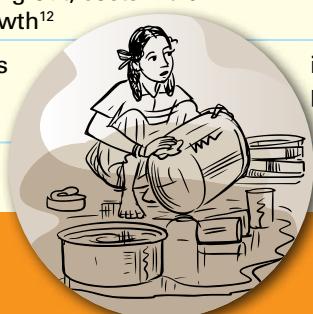
is three times less likely to contract HIV¹³

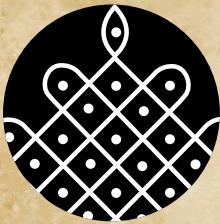
will marry at a later age, and have fewer, healthier and better educated children¹⁴

is better paid and more productive at work,¹⁵ and reinvests 90% of what she earns in her family¹⁴

increases the economic growth of the country¹⁴

is more involved in her community and better prepared for decision-making¹⁶





Barriers to girls' education

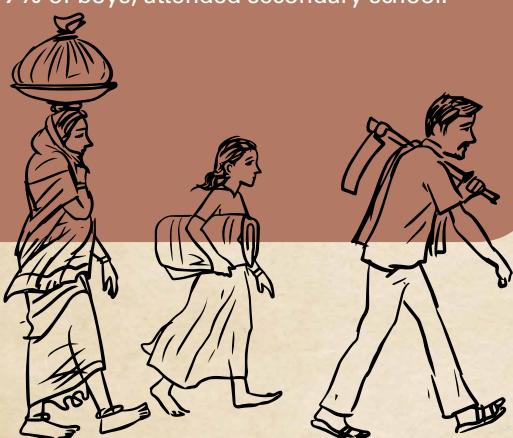
Early marriage leads to girls' drop out from school

In 2006, 35% of adolescent girls in northern Karnataka dropped out of school because of marriage.¹⁷



Facing poverty, families tend to remove girls from school

In 2005–06, only 49% of girls, as compared to 59% of boys, attended secondary school.¹⁸



Many school committees are not addressing the needs of girls

In 2009–10, school development management committees (SDMCs) were able to perform only 20% of their assigned duties.²¹



Girls' education is not valued

In northern Karnataka, 17% of rural parents said girls should study as long as they want, as compared to 35% for boys.¹⁷



Devadasi tradition pushes young girls into sex work

Most devadasis are from SC/ST communities and enter sex work at a mean age of 16 years.^{6,7}



Boys' misconduct puts girls off school

Girls in Karnataka reported ragging by boys as the most unpleasant experience in school.¹⁹



Schools lack adequate infrastructure to encourage girls' education

For example, 69% of high schools in rural Bijapur had no useable toilets.²⁰



Enablers of girls' education



Girls gain confidence and leadership

Safe spaces for girls improve their self-esteem and life skills.^{8, 22}



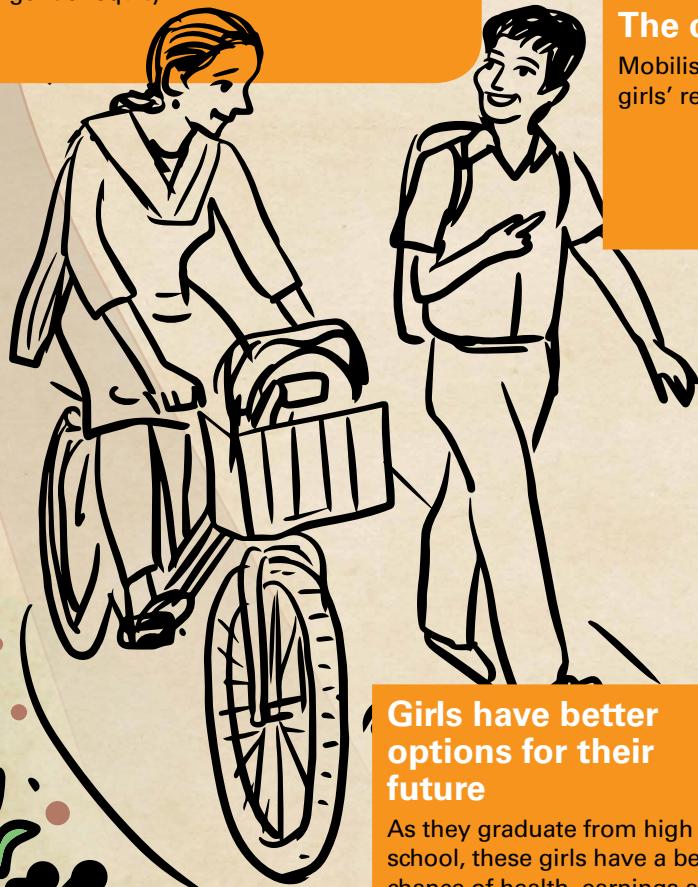
Parents are involved in girls' education

Government incentives encourage parents to support girls' schooling and boost girls' academic performance.^{8, 24, 25}



Boys accept girls as equal classmates

Changing boys' attitudes modifies their behaviour towards girls and promotes gender equity.^{8, 24, 26, 27}



Girls have better options for their future

As they graduate from high school, these girls have a better chance of health, earnings and healthy future families of their own.¹⁴

The community values girls' education

Mobilised communities and engaged local government track girls' retention and promote their education.^{24, 28, 29}



Programme

To increase the numbers of girls who enrol in and complete high school, Sabala:

- **provides special tuition, career counselling and leadership training to improve girls' academic success and broaden their aspirations**
- **establishes reflection sessions for girls to share experiences and build solidarity and confidence**
- **sensitises parents to value girls and recognise the importance of educating them**
- **links families to government schemes that provide incentives for educating girls**
- **uses sports to encourage boys to respect girls and appreciate their rights**
- **trains SDMCs and school staff to institute measures to increase girls' safety and academic success**
- **supports community structures to understand the importance of girls' education and take action.**

In all these ways, Sabala challenges negative gender norms and promotes the adoption of positive ones.



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Evaluation

STRIVE partners KHPT and LSHTM are conducting a three-year, mixed-method, community randomised trial to assess the impact of individual programme elements and of Sabala overall. The study will show if, why and how these efforts increase the numbers of girls who enrol in and complete high school. The learning will give critical guidance for policies and programmes to improve the health, education and future of adolescent girls in northern Karnataka and beyond.

<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk>

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