Parivartan for Girls: Addressing restrictive gender norms

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Parivartan for Girls – a sports-based programme with adolescent girls aged 12 to 16 in a slum community in Mumbai, India – achieved shifts in the norms that restrict the public mobility of post-menarche girls, constrain their education and future options and reinforce gender inequality. Apnalaya, a grassroots NGO with longstanding presence and credibility in the community, implemented the intervention. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) conducted the research, with the STRIVE research consortium. Social norms theory was used to shape this girl-centric programme and to analyse findings. As a demonstration project, Parivartan for Girls yielded valuable lessons for practice.

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.

Gender norms are powerful and pervasive beliefs about gender-based social roles, deeply embedded in social structures. In India, gender norms reinforce women's caregiving and reproductive roles and limit their access to public space. Produced by patriarchal power relations, norms are maintained, in part, by self-surveillance, as girls perform internalised gender 'scripts'. 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.[1] The visible display of gender in day-to-day social interactions allows neighbours and communities to police women's actions.[2]

KEY TERMS FROM NORMS THEORY

Social norms: Rules of behaviour shared by members of a group or society, held in place by empirical and normative expectations and often enforced by social sanctions

Empirical expectations: People's beliefs about "what others do"

Normative expectations: People's beliefs about "what others think should be done"

Social sanctions: Positive or negative responses or reactions by others to the behaviour of an individual. Examples of positive sanctions might include: smiling, patting on the shoulder or being granted higher status in the community. Examples of negative sanctions might include: scolding, gossiping, threats or physical aggression. People's anticipation of how others will respond in case of compliance (positive sanctions) or non-compliance (negative sanctions) is believed to affect their behaviour

Reference groups: The 'others' whose behaviour and opinions matter in shaping a person's normative beliefs. For some behaviours, the boundaries of reference groups are distinctly defined. For norms that operate at the level of society or culture, the notion of reference group may be less relevant

Personal attitudes: People's individual preferences, independent of what others do or what is deemed to be appropriate; that is: what they would prefer to do if they could choose outside of a social context

Credit: Ben Cislaghi and Lori Heise. 2016. Measuring Gender-related Social Norms, Learning Report 1. Learning Group on Social Norms and Gender-related Harmful Practices of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

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'.[3] 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.[4] 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.

The programme

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 programme identified and recruited relatively progressive young women from within the slum community to serve as 'mentors' to younger girls. 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.

Ten mentors received intensive training to lead reflection sessions on gender and to coach *kabaddi*, a contact team sport. Over the course of 15 months, the mentors guided teams of younger girls through a structured programme of life skills and gender training. Girls met twice a week: once for two hours to play *kabaddi* at the sports ground on Sundays, and once for one and a half hours of reflection mid-week at a local Apnalaya centre.

The gender curriculum alternated sessions using prepared cards with group education activities. The card series introduced life skills such as dealing with emotions, setting goals, dealing with peer pressure, enhancing self-esteem; gender equality, gender roles and discrimination regarding schooling and mobility; and healthy habits for adolescents. The curriculum also covered puberty and menstruation (facilitated by a female doctor to avoid any possibility of misinformation) and how to respond to instances of sexual harassment, or other forms of violence girls may face in the community. By the end of 15 months, 100 girls had successfully completed the curriculum.

Figure 1. Variations and changes in mobility restrictions
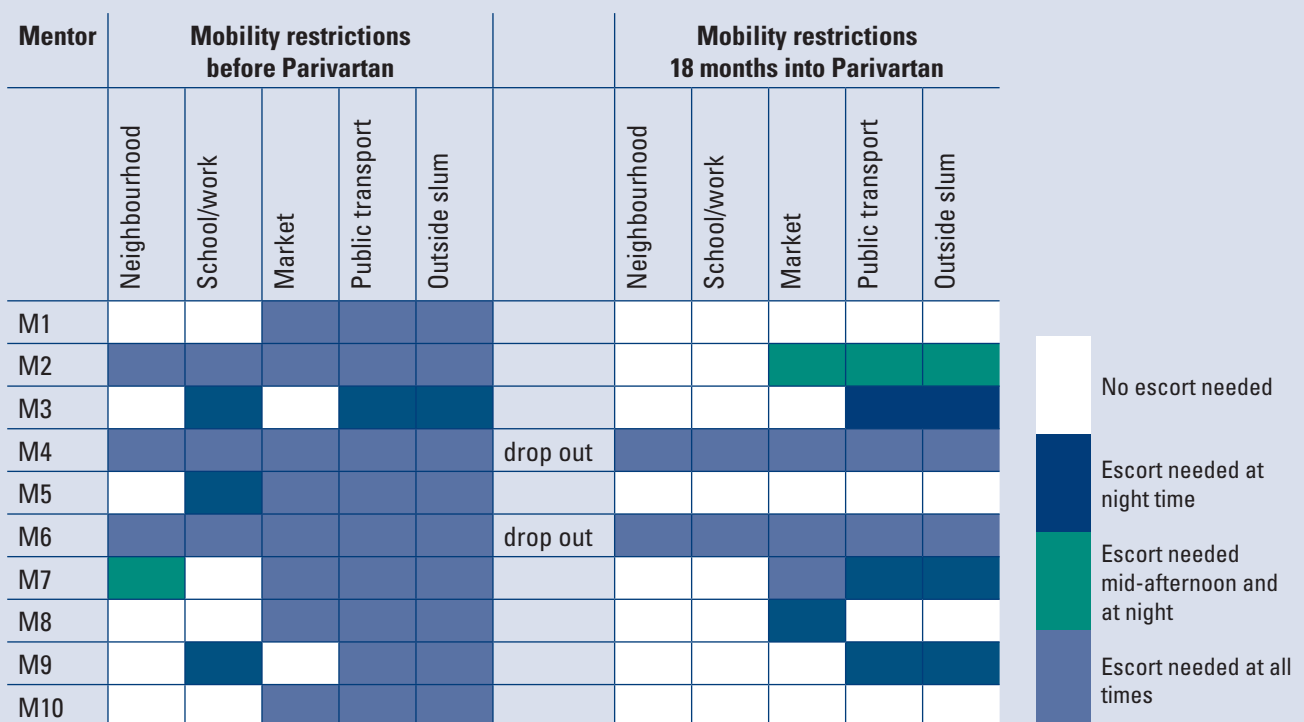
Credit: Bankar, S. et al. *BMC Public Health.* 2018.

Figure 2: Average number of sessions and girls who attended
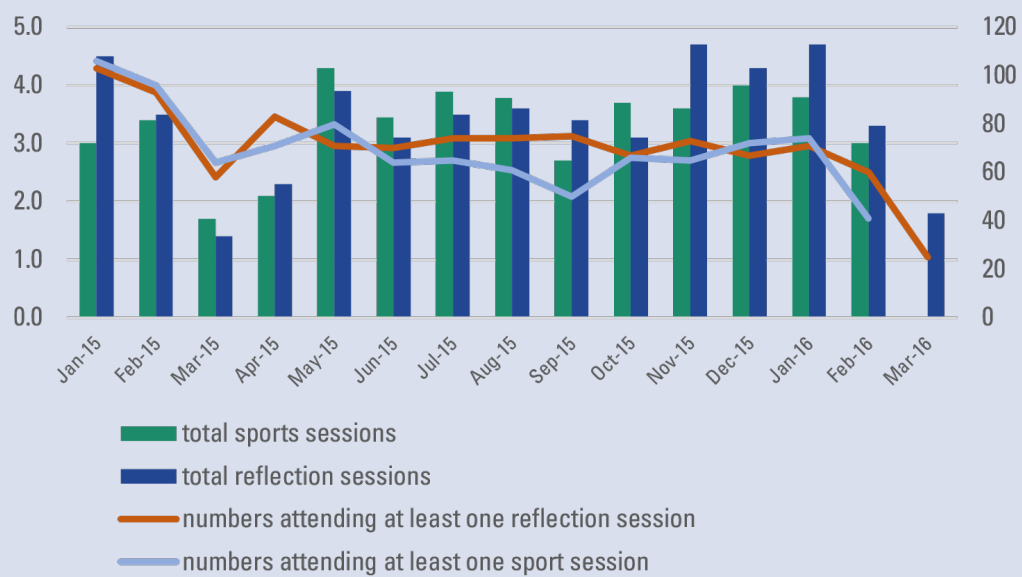
Credit: Collumbien et al. *Development in Practice.* 2019

To engage families, Apnalaya staff formed parents' groups and facilitated monthly reflection sessions with both mothers and fathers of participating girls, covering topics including communication skills between parents and daughters, the value of girls and girls' education, benefits of delaying marriage and issues around sexual harassment. The intention was for parents and girls to form a new reference group or network, with visibility within the community for resisting the social pressure of prevailing gender norms and opting for more gender-progressive ones.

To provide guidance and community engagement, the Parivartan team formed a Community Advisory Board. To begin with, girls playing *kabaddi* in totally public spaces was seen as unacceptable. Community members insisted that the sports sessions be organised in a school ground behind a boundary wall, with a security guard to ward off the gaze and unwanted attention of boys and men. However, the programme culminated in a public *kabaddi* tournament and this won community endorsement and created positive visibility around girls involved in sports.

Evaluation

The researchers used a prospective qualitative research design to study the interaction between the intervention and the changing context.[5] They based their analysis on case studies of 10 mentors and 15 athletes, with interview guides based on literature on gender practices in India and understanding of the community based on formative research. Personalised interviews in the second and third round covered the same topics, with semi-structured interviews asking open-ended questions.

What have we learned?

The evaluation found 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

From qualitative research into Parivartan for Girls as a demonstration project, six key messages emerge to inform future research and programming.

1. Recognise sport as a feasible – but not sufficient – platform for addressing gender norms
2. Build the programme with a trusted, local, community-embedded partner
3. Invest in those in the community who are most ready to change
4. Foster collective agency as a basis to cultivate individual agency
5. Ensure that the strategies and programme are culturally appropriate
6. Make change visible in day-to-day interactions

1 Message: Recognise sport as a feasible – but not sufficient – platform for addressing gender norms

The evaluation of Parivartan for Girls confirmed that sport is a feasible basis for programming on gender norms. Despite a dearth of role models, aspirations and collective power, sport proved to be a beneficial and valuable vehicle for a gender transformative programme. The very fact of girls playing sport challenged gender norms.

Some in the field have exaggerated the developmental powers of sport, putting the onus on girls for achieving change and ignoring the broader structural inequalities and gender relations that marginalise girls in the first place.[6] However, to be effective, a gender transformative programme must go beyond sport, as Parivartan for Girls did, and include a carefully designed process of learning and reflection on social expectations and personal aspirations, along with strategies for family and community levels. Reflection sessions raised awareness, built confidence and provided space for strategising together. Back at home, the young women put into practice the skills and awareness that they gained from the curriculum. At the next session, they reflected together on failures, repetition and strategies, such as "Wait till mother is in a good mood."

2 Message: Build the programme with a trusted, local, community-embedded partner

ICRW's Asia Regional Office (ICRW Asia) worked with Apnalaya, a trusted local community-based organisation (CBO) that has been active in the Shivaji Nagar slum for 40 years, to define the objectives and approach of Parivartan for Girls. Apnalaya staff then identified suitable families for the programme, based on previous, intense contact on (for instance) self-help programmes and scholarships for girls. Within these families, they identified and recruited educated young women as mentors to implement the programme and provide role models to whom parents could relate.

In this way, specific implementation strategies came from within the community. For Parivartan for Girls, Apnalaya and the young mentors shaped the programme strategies, and this proved essential to the success of the programme. The mentors' own journey as they negotiated their mobility and visibility in the community was crucial. They were best placed to gauge how to take risks and stay safe in public spaces, as they carved out a new social role for themselves, respected by neighbours and admired by the parents of athletes.

The mentors served as teachers, role models and

STRIVE PUBLICATIONS

Bankar, S., Collumbien, M., Das, M., Verma, R., Cislaghi, B. & Heise, L., (2018), **Contesting restrictive mobility norms among female mentors implementing a sports-based programme for young girls in a Mumbai slum**, *BMC Public Health*.

Collumbien, M., Das, M., Bankar, S., Cislaghi, B, Heise, L. & Verma, R., (2018), **Practice-based insights in developing and implementing a sport-based programme for girls**, *Development in Practice*.

Cislaghi, B. & Bankar, S. (first authors), Verma, R., Heise, L., & Collumbien, M., (2019), **Widening Cracks in Patriarchy: Mothers and Daughters Navigating Gender Norms in a Mumbai Slum**, *Global Health and Development*. (in press)

girl advocates. They came up with strategies to avoid risk and achieve greater access and mobility. They negotiated with their own parents, with the athletes' parents and with men. From the training period onwards, the mentors had the task of running the programme. Their first practice ground for asserting agency was the home (the mentors' homes, then the homes of the athletes), first with the mother, later with the father. Cycles of failure and repetition followed. With improved communication, the focus moved from the family to the street and the neighbours and finally, through the public tournament, to the community at large.

3 Message: Invest in those in the community who are most ready to change

The Parivartan mentors were educated, unmarried young women from relatively gender-progressive families. Rather than trying to change everyone from the start, the programme identified mentors from among a growing group who were ready for change: 'positive deviants' from the most gender-progressive families in the community. It took several months and many repeat visits to identify and enrol 150 girls, of whom 35 did not participate after all.

Staging is important. Some families refused to let their daughters participate at first. However, when they witnessed the first group of athletes competing in a public tournament, they saw change in action and wanted to become involved.

4 Message: Foster collective agency as a basis to cultivate individual agency

Parivartan for Girls enhanced the agency of the young women mentors to strategise and negotiate greater freedom and visibility in their community. The mentors contested mobility restrictions by

taking risks as a group first, with collective agency an important step towards greater individual agency in day-to-day interactions.

Initially, the Parivartan mentors took back streets and walked only as a group, but as they gained confidence and experience, they took more populated roads. Because the mentors needed to visit athletes' families so many times, they started to go on their own. The programme team created or welcomed opportunities for girls to take risks. Bit by bit, when they felt able, the mentors and athletes contested the limits on mobility. As the only available sports ground for practice was nearly an hour's walk away, challenges became opportunities.

5 Message: Ensure that programme strategies are culturally appropriate

Gender-transformative programmes need to be responsive to the norms of specific communities. Qualitative research for Parivartan for Girls helped to clarify the desire to be good parents, ensuring a girl's future marriageablity with her own honour and that of the family intact. Opposition from both parents and community members to girls' presence in public spaces related to a strong community norm that good parenting means protecting girls from the male gaze – an expectation closely policed by relatives and neighbours. The perceived threat of sexual harassment in public spaces, with potential reputational damage, was the main barrier, both for girls' leisure and for their attendance at school.

With this understanding, the programme was able to help the mentors to negotiate a 'respectable' identity with a role in community development and win parents' trust in their ability to be safe in public spaces. Parents became active participants, with mothers playing a strategic role in changing dynamics at home and with the fathers. Both the girls and their parents began to resist the social sanctions from neighbours and relatives. The programme achieved endorsement at the community level for eroding dominant gender norms while ensuring the safety of girls.

6 Message: Make change visible in day-to-day interactions

Where individual agency is largely constrained by structural factors, social change starts at the level of social practices: via changes in day-to-day social relations that individuals and communities cultivate.[7] Although the mentors transgressed social norms, they experienced no sanctions because they were seen to be filling a respectable role as part of the programme to support girls. In addition they were seen to negotiate and respond to gossip. Women in the neighbourhood began to ask for their advice, first about children but later on other issues including their own relationships.

QUOTES FROM MENTORS

"I was not sure if I would be allowed to be out for this training as it was for five days and we had to stay there. You know the people here talk so much about girls. If a girl is not seen in the house for one night they come asking, 'Where is your daughter? She is not seen.' They have nothing to do with it yet they will come and ask the mother or at least gossip with other women in the area. This is bad…. with this fear of bad name parents don't send their daughter out in the night to stay somewhere else."

"Whenever I am late at the sessions or the meetings that Apnalaya has for us in this programme, the women around my house come and ask my mother, 'where is she? It is so late? When will she come? She should not be out of the house for such long hours.' That is when my mother tells them straight in their face, 'She is out doing some good work and I am proud of my daughter. We (parents) trust her.' When my mother says this they keep quiet for a moment, but the next time I am late they come and ask again, but my mother stands by me. I am happy that she understands my role as a mentor."

"Actually, the first time I went to [one neighbourhood] without another mentor, I was also very scared. In the entire area you will only see men around. And to go through this crowd initially was a big challenge we had. So we would get out through the internal lanes because we did not want to go through them. This is how it worked for us for two or three months but now we can easily tell the men to move and we make our way through the crowd even when alone."

What is the impact?

ICRW was invited to present the approach and findings at various national and international conferences on sports-based programming and gender interventions, including the Girl Power at Play symposium, organised by Women Deliver and UNICEF, in Ottawa, Canada, June 2015.

Parivartan for Girls has been adapted and implemented by ICRW in other settings including:

- Skillz Plus, implemented by Grassroot Soccer in Zambia, 2012–14
- PAnKH, another sports-based intervention study by ICRW Asia in Rajasthan, 2014–18
- Samata, also a STRIVE study, implemented by KHPT in Karnataka, India, 2012–19
- Khula Asma, a follow-up implemented by Apnalaya in Mumbai, India, 2014–19

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The Parivartan programme made change visible

The young athletes demonstrated their presence and mobility in public space at a *kabaddi* tournament that concluded the Parivartan programme

More information: http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/projects/parivartan-girls

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.