I AM NOT ALONE

Mobilizing Adolescent Girls for Social Change
1. INTRODUCTION

A village or urban community is not homogenous; households and families differ on economic, social and political bases; some are rich, of higher caste (or social status), more educated, have greater external exposure, are politically connected and networked; others, not so.

Since individuals and families of the poor and marginalized lack power vis-à-vis other elites and government agencies, organization and mobilization become strategies of power equalization. The strategy of mobilization is important from the perspective of self-reliance. Mobilized individuals work towards their own well-being.

In many development programmes, organization and mobilization of women is a necessary first step towards their empowerment. Only if they come together as women first are they able to articulate their shared concerns and common interests. In the long run, it may be desirable to mobilize adolescent girls (and boys) in a community in order to enable them to address several social issues (like violence against women or access to education). Empowered when younger, they grow up to be adults who are enabled and can thereby change social relations and power equations.

When women and adolescent girls as individuals come together as a group they begin to express themselves. The process of empowerment is set in motion when they learn their situation is not unique and there are others who face the same difficulties. Awareness that they are not to be blamed, and understanding the causes of socialisation and unequal power relations frees them up to do something about it. Later, they are able to interact with other community members, to get organized so that common issues may be taken up together for overall development.

Many approaches, methods, tools and processes of mobilization have been developed in a wide variety of practices and contexts. Building awareness, sharing information, enhancing capacities and creating external linkages are some of the common methods in mobilizing interventions. In the next section, the story-telling mode is used to outline some of the methods and processes of mobilization which were used in three projects — Kishori Panchayats in Bihar, Addressing Violence Against Dalit Women in Haryana and the Vidya-Gyan scholarship programme in Uttar Pradesh.

2. THE STORIES

The adolescent girls in these stories may come from different regions, castes and religions, but they share a lot in common. They are all socially and economically disadvantaged—being dalits and/or Muslim they are socially marginalized and being poor they lack resources. Being girls, their lives are circumscribed by
patriarchal mindsets which dictate what a girl should do and how she should behave. She is brought up to think she is a “burden” on her parents. She is often the sibling who is denied education—either because her parents believe it is not necessary to educate daughters or made to drop out of school to contribute to the family income. And then she is married off at an early age, to become once again dependent on another.

When and how can she become an individual in her own right, having the right to dream, to take her own decisions? When she is empowered to act to make her life and her community a more equal world.

From Adolescent To Community Leader

This story is told from the viewpoint of a young woman sarpanch, Rekha Kumari, who was a member of the Kishori Group in her village when she was an adolescent. As a member of the Kishori Group she was part of the Kishori Panchayat programme.¹

Rekha opened the doors to the newly constructed panchayat office. As sarpanch of her village, she always made sure she was there in the afternoon as this was the time when the villagers were relatively free, particularly women. Seeing her in the office, many of them would come to the panchayat bhawan to air their grievances, learn about new schemes and ask for help to access government entitlements.

The panchayat office was located next to the village information centre. Rekha sat in the small courtyard outside her office observing some mothers entering the village information centre along with their adolescent daughters. They were there to attend a health meeting called by the ASHA worker.

Seeing the mothers and daughters coming together to attend a meeting, Rekha felt nostalgic. She used to accompany her mother for community meetings held by an NGO to raise awareness about panchayati raj institutions. A new bill had just been passed in Delhi, bringing democracy to the grassroots². Her mother and friends used to sing, “Dilli se ailai sakhiya Panchayati Raj he, Okre main hotai sakhi, hamni ke kaj he…” (O friend, Panchayati Raj has come from Delhi. Out of that will emerge our [the people’s] raj).

Rekha was taken along because her mother would not leave her alone at home; she did not think it was safe or the “right” thing to do. Rekha enjoyed the meetings. She was studying about panchayati raj in school and it was very interesting to hear the practical details in these meetings.

¹ The Kishori Panchayat programme was conducted by CENCORED in partnership with other civil society organizations in Bihar. The Kishori Panchayat was seen as an incubation chamber for young girls to get practical experience of how a panchayat is elected and works. The aim was that being exposed to these processes at a younger age, these girls would be motivated to stand for elections and participate in gram sabha meetings when they were older. Source: Kishori Panchayat: Incubation Chamber for Future Women Leadership, CENCORED, Patna, accessed in PRIA’s digital library.

² Reference is to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act passed in 1993 which made grassroots elected institutions the cornerstone of democratic governance in India.
Observing that a number of girls like Rekha accompanied their mothers, the community organizer from the NGO encouraged the adolescent girls (kishoris) to form their own group – a Kishori Group. Adolescent girls have very close interaction with their mothers and women family members and can influence the older women. They are enthusiastic to learn and being young are eager to get involved in social activities. A few years later, when they will be able to actively participate in electoral politics, they could be potential community leaders. The community organizer sensitized the teachers on this which helped created further interest among the adolescent girls.

Rekha and her friends were so excited to be part of the Kishori Group. They received training on panchayati raj, communication methods like street plays and were encouraged to talk about their personal concerns in the joint meetings with the older women. The Kishori Group resolved issues through group decision making. United they could achieve much more, they realized. When some of them were asked to discontinue their studies because the high school was in another village and their parents thought travelling was unsafe, all the girls convinced the parents that they should be allowed to continue their studies. They agreed to travel to and from school together; there is safety in numbers, after all.

They got to meet girls who were part of Kishori Groups in other villages, and formed a Kishori Panchayat. Seven such groups were brought together. Each Kishori Group elected two panchayat members, forming a Kishori Panchayat of 14 members. From these members a mukhiya and sarpanch were elected. Rekha had been elected sarpanch of her Kishori Panchayat, and here she was today, the sarpanch of her village! The “mock panchayat” they had held was a very useful training ground for the work she had to do now. She was well aware of the different committees required to prepare voters’ lists, prepare ballot papers, how to appoint the polling party, select the counting personnel, file her nomination, choose and allot election symbols, the social issues to raise in an election campaign and counting of votes. But it was the oath-taking ceremony which had affected Rekha the most. Was that the moment she decided she was going to contest panchayat elections when she was an adult?

**Same Village, A Different World**

*This is the diary entry of Seema, an adolescent dalit girl, who underwent a participatory training to build understanding on gender and sex, the role socialization plays in our gendered roles and awareness about violence against women, specifically against dalit women.*

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3 The training was conducted under the second phase of the project “Accountable and Transparent Local Governments: Addressing Violence Against Dalit Women in Haryana” undertaken by PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia). One of the objectives of the project is to develop awareness in dalit youth, including adolescent girls and young men, on issues of violence against their community, especially women, and build their capacity to oppose retaliatory and violent steps which perpetuate the cycle of gender- and caste-based violence. The project also aims to enhance and strengthen Social Justice Committees and build linkages with government agencies and legal aid cells. Source: PRIA Bi-Annual Project Report (October 2012-March 2013), Internal document. To know more about PRIA’s work, visit [www.pria.org](http://www.pria.org)
This morning when I woke up, it was just another day, I was the same as yesterday. At the end of the day, I'm different. Today I have understood why my younger sister and I were bought kitchen sets and my brother was given a motor cycle to play with.

I travelled along with my Kishori Group friends to Sonepat today, to attend a training conducted by PRIA. PRIA is not new to us; I have seen their animators in my village for nearly four years now. They have facilitated many community meetings, telling our parents about the importance of gram sabhas and the responsibility of the panchayat to set up a Social Justice Committee which will look specifically into the welfare and development of dalits.

My mother does not want me to have the same life she has had—dependent on her father and then a husband for everything, unable to read and write, not being confident enough to venture out on her own. She’s heard there are many job opportunities nowadays in the cities; she wants me to be a graduate so that I can work and stand on my own two feet. Education, she has come to realize, is the way.

My father? Well, he doesn’t say much but I can feel his disapproval as he quietens my mother whenever she talks of educating me further. My father is the sole breadwinner. He earns a small income by running a tea shop on the highway near my village. I have a younger sister and brother. It’s difficult for my parents to pay for our education. Which is why my mother has visited the village information centre to find out which government schemes are available to provide financial assistance so that I can continue to study.

I have often accompanied my mother when she goes to the village information centre, and during one of our visits we met with PRIA’s animator. She encouraged girls from my village to form our Kishori Group and spoke to our mothers to allow us to go for this training. She even spoke to our teacher. Our mothers agreed to send us for the training, provided they could come along with us; a group of young girls travelling on their own to Sonepat, the district headquarters, was unheard of in our village!

I was surprised to see 40 girls from other villages at the training. I got to know who they were when we played a game. We formed two circles—one inner circle and an outer circle—and each girl introduced herself—her name, the name of her village, and what she likes to do—before passing the ball to the girl next to her.

After the introductions we were divided into two groups. One group was called “Girls”, and the other was called “Boys”. There were two charts on the wall. Each of us had to go up and write one word, any word, related to the group we belonged to. Oh my! I was put in the boys group. How do I know what or how a boy thinks?

I moved to the back of the group, not wanting to be the first to be called. Most girls were like me. But there were some girls who stood in the front of the group,
eagerly awaiting their turn. I looked at them in amazement. What made them so confident? I wanted to be like them.

Once the charts were filled, the trainer, Nandita, called out the words and explained which words are applicable only to girls, those which apply only to boys and those which apply to both. It was through this that I understood the difference between “gender” and “sex”.

For the next activity we were divided into four groups. Each group had to discuss one topic—careers and professions, festivals, games/toys and proverbs. I was in the group which had to discuss games/toys. We were asked to write the points we had discussed in our group on charts. These were used to generate a discussion among all of us. Hearing what the others had to say made me realize I am not alone. I became conscious how our families, our community dictated from the time we were born how girls should dress, how they should talk and behave, that they had to learn to cook and clean. Our brothers were given their food first, were allowed to play outside when they came home from school, even coming home after dark, while we had to help around the house.

What a surprise it was to see that our mothers too had been involved in an activity. They had written down what they do from the time they get up in the morning to the time they go to bed. When we saw our mother’s charts and they saw ours, we all realized that women were always busy with a domestic chore, doing things for others. We had no time to ourselves.

After lunch, Nandita explained the different forms of violence faced by women—physical abuse, sexual abuse, mental abuse and verbal abuse. We discussed where and when we faced these in our daily lives. I had never even thought of these things before, let alone talk about them, with people I had met for the very first time today! But somehow they didn’t feel like strangers—having spent the day together, knowing that we were all going through the same things, made it easier to talk about such sensitive topics.

We ended by singing a local song about the different hardships faced by a woman from the time she is in her mother’s womb till her old age. I have heard the same song sung by my mother, my aunts, my grandmothers. It’s been sung in our community for generations. Knowing what I do after today, it is as if I am singing about myself.

I want to sing a different song to my daughter.

**Beyond Boundaries**

*This story is told from the perspective of a community instructor of the Vidya-Gyan programme.*

4Community instructors tutor the girls in coaching sessions in various

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4The programme described in this story is the Vidya-Gyan Scholarship programme implemented by Sahabhagi Shikshan Kendra (SSK) in Cholapur, on the outskirts of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. The programme focuses on girl-child education and women’s empowerment. It offers girls in Classes VI
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subjects such as maths, science, Hindi and English. They also teach dance, embroidery, mehndi and crafts. They serve as mentors and work closely with the families on any issue that arises.

I’ve been working on the programme for nearly two years now in Cholapur. Cholapur is a community of nearly 204348 of which half of them OBCs (Muslim) and dalits. In most families, the men are employed in the traditional weaving business, which is now in decline. Their economic condition is not good.

Before the Vidya-Gyan programme began, 92% of Muslim girls dropped out of school after Class VI. Most of them did so to help their families in weaving. Today, I see the girls supported by the programme empowered to continue their education and to advocate for it. They have understood the importance of education.

The Vidya-Gyan programme identifies Muslim girls and gives them a scholarship to help with their education. Since the start of the programme, all the girls have continued their education, which has been possible because of the scholarship they receive.

The scholarship amount is not much—Rs 500 for students studying in Classes VI to X. It is the sense of empowerment the scholarship gives which is the real reward. The money is deposited directly into a bank account opened in the girl’s name, not her parents’. The girl who receives the scholarship decides how she will spend that money. The only condition is she has to spend it on something which will facilitate her education. The student chooses how to spend the money and learns how to go to the bank to make withdrawals. The girls do consult their families before taking the decision. Most girls use the money to pay for stationery, school supplies, or clothes. Some girls have bought bicycles. Others have given the money to their families to spend on food or for medical help. With the goal of increasing their employability, a six month computer course is also offered to all scholarship holders. An additional Rs 250 is given to students of Class IX and X for this course.

It is clear that the girls look forward to the coaching classes. I look forward to them too! Not only do I help them study, we talk about issues that are affecting their lives. The girls spend a fair amount of time on activities which aid their personality development, such as singing, dancing and inter-personal communication. They also participate in awareness campaigns on social issues such as female foeticide and domestic violence. They celebrate Women’s Day through skits, dance, poems and music. In the summer, they continue with the coaching classes but also find time to use the village resource centre to read books and play games. The most exciting was when we took them on a field trip to Sarnath, a textile expo and SSK’s financial assistance and educational support to help keep them in school. Source: Sky Is Not the Limit: An Initiative Toward Promoting Muslim and Dalit Girl Child Education, documented by Kate Bush, a volunteer from American Jewish World Service, published by Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow. To know more about SSK’s work, visit http://www.sabhagi.org/index.htm.

5 Based on a study conducted by two interns in two villages, Dharsuna and Hariharapur, in Cholapur block.
office in Varanasi. Most girls had never been outside Cholapur!

I try and make the practice exercises interactive and fun, using creative techniques like skits, stories and poems to explain material. We have quizzes and watch educational films. I need to pay special attention to those who are shy. Suman was having a hard time writing her ABCs, but hesitated to ask for my help. Noticing her struggling, I applied the training I had received on teaching methodologies for weaker students. Today, she translates sentences between Hindi and English without my help.

The programme is creating well rounded girls who excel academically. The girls speak with confidence and are creative. Often parents are shocked to see the transformation in their child. Mothers who regretted not completing their own education are happy to see their daughters get the opportunity to do so. Doors are opening for these girls, and they will walk ahead in life with energy and confidence, built on the foundation of an education.

3. FACILITATING AND CONSTRAINING FACTORS

What factors contribute and strengthen the mobilization of adolescent girls?

a) The most important factor is the support of their mothers. In all the projects, the mothers were sensitized first. The bond between a mother and her daughter is strong. In rural communities in particular they spend a lot of time with each other. This helps in exchanging ideas and views. In the Kishori Panchayat programme, daughters accompanied their mothers to meetings, and were then mobilized to spread awareness in the community on the issue of panchayati raj. In Haryana, the mothers accompany the daughters to trainings, and in the process learn about a world that is different.

b) It is also necessary to get support from a community member who is respected by the community. In all instances, support was garnered from teachers as well. In India, teachers are held in high regard by everyone in a community. Getting their support is always beneficial for initiating change.

c) It is equally necessary to involve the larger community, beyond the members who are most affected by the specific issue. For example, in addressing violence against dalit women, the primary focus for mobilization is dalit women and girls. However, women from other castes, adolescent boys and public and private organizations and agencies from within and outside the community are also engaged with as part of the project to participate. In the Vidya-Gyan project, the issue of education was raised in the gram sabha to spread awareness and in the village education committee in order to improve the quality of education in government schools.

d) In each intervention, the entry point into the larger community was an issue that was of benefit to the community—panchayati raj in Bihar, violence against
dalit women in Haryana and quality education of Muslim girls in Uttar Pradesh. The mobilizer enhanced awareness of these issues among the groups.

e) The role of the mobilizer/enabler is crucial. It is based on a relationship of trust, built over time. He/she is both teacher and mentor.

f) Education is the tool for development. The adolescent girls wanted to study, to go to school. Their passion for education was the springboard for their desire to develop as individuals and to hope for a different future.

g) Discussion in the group meetings was not restricted only to the specific issue being addressed (panchyati raj, violence against women, education). The girls were encouraged to talk about any issue that they were facing in their lives. This led to the girls feeling comfortable within the group, building trust with each other and with the mobilizer.

h) In each project, a combination of mobilization methods were used—building awareness, sharing information, enhancing capacities and creating external linkages.

Mobilization of course is not without challenges. The constraints faced were:

a) Socially oppressed individuals/groups do not find it easy to express themselves. Not only does it take time to motivate them to come together, it takes even more time and effort to get them to speak up.

b) Adolescent girls are strongly circumscribed in the activities and people they can associate with. Exposure to the wider world is restricted and they are not allowed to go to public spaces on their own. They are taught to take permission before doing anything outside the house and are not allowed to stay out of the house after dark. This can mean they are often denied the opportunity of attending community meetings, particularly those which are held in the evenings.

c) Women and young girls have very little time left to engage in extra social activities. Domestic chores take up most of their time, particularly in disadvantaged families who do not have access to public services. For example, dalit households in most villages do not have access to tap water in their homes. This means women have to trudge long distances to bring water. While the mothers are busy doing this, the older girls are asked to stay at home to complete housework and look after younger siblings.

d) Animators and community mobilizers may change during a project or when a new project commences. This could mean building trust all over again with the group. This can impede the process of empowerment.

e) The long term impact of mobilization and awareness generation is difficult to
quantify. This can affect how the “success” of the project is measured.

Adolescents undergo countless changes in their lives, both emotional and physical. The changes are fast-paced, and often difficult to comprehend and deal with. It is a phase of enquiry, when girls and boys naturally begin to question the world around them, who they are and who they want to become. Finding answers collectively is powerful. Hearing others’ stories and questions leads to the realization that they are not alone in their struggle to understand themselves, their bodies, the society they live in. This has a profound impact on their growth as individuals.

For girls, in rural communities in particular, the process of coming together leads to greater empowerment because being socially bound and circumscribed, they rarely get the chance to interact and meet with others of their own age who are like themselves. Organizing into groups gives them a safe space to meet and talk. Knowledge of issues beyond their own homes and the tools of engagement they learn become the foundation on which they grow up to be adults with a voice who then influence and change society in the long term.

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