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# **Youth and community based approaches to tackling violence against women and girls: reflections from India**

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## Introduction

Violence against women is a worldwide yet still largely hidden problem. One in three women worldwide will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime' (Walby, et al, 2017. 2). This matters. Violence wrecks lives (Ibid.). But freedom from the threats of harassment and sexual assault are freedoms that so many women can hardly imagine, because violence is such a deep rooted aspect of so many cultures. '

These issues are becoming increasingly recognised for the social injustices that they are – and increasingly challenged, however. - This has been especially so in India, following the national -and indeed the international- publicity that followed the horrific rape of a young woman in Delhi, in 2012. Although the victim subsequently died from her injuries, this was not before she had time to give evidence about the attack, and so to raise wider awareness of the urgent need for action in response.

This is the context for this particular study. The Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)'s Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) Campaign has been promoting a series of community education and development initiatives in eleven locations across India. These interventions have set out to engage young people, boys as well as girls, along with their parents, their wider families and their communities. Meanwhile, local organisations and institutions are being similarly engaged, in parallel, including schools and colleges, village government officials, health service providers and the police. Through processes of dialogue, stakeholders are being encouraged to become more responsive to the needs of women and girls, working in partnership with local communities to ensure their safety.

The KBC initiatives started from the recognition that simply telling people that they needed to change would be unlikely to have the desired effect. On the contrary in fact, initiatives such as 'myth-busting' projects can actually prove counterproductive. Far from altering people's views when presented with the facts about immigration, for instance, such initiatives can even confirm people in their previous prejudices (Blake et al, 2008). People need to be actively engaged by those that they already trust if they are to be encouraged to question deep-seated prejudices and beliefs. The arts have particular

contributions to make in these respects (Boal, 1979, Clover and Sanford, 2013, Rooke, 2013, English and Irving, 2015).

So the KBC initiatives set out to engage young people and their communities through community education and development projects, encouraging them to participate in a range of activities to stimulate dialogue and critical reflection. These activities included the use of drama, poetry and song as well as through sports, boys and girls playing together (typically a completely new experience for the young people concerned). KBC has also included the use of participatory exercises such as Participatory Safety Audits (PSAs), mapping the places where young people did – or did not - feel safe, and then discussing the implications together, in their communities. These activities have been designed to be fun, as well as being potentially instructive, encouraging young people and their communities to question previously accepted norms about gender, gender inequalities and violence.

This research was undertaken with the aim of complementing the findings from more quantitative KBC reports, working with PRIA to **co-produce** a framework(s) for more participative forms of evaluation for the future. An outsider might bring a fresh perspective, along with suggestions for ways of adapting participative evaluation frameworks from elsewhere. But local knowledge and understanding were absolutely crucial to this project, and so were the relationships of trust that had already been developed with those to be involved in the research. As an outsider I relied upon others for translation – both specifically, in terms of addressing language barriers simultaneously, and more generally, in terms of understanding differences of culture and context. Co-production was essential then.

The study included a series of visits, individual meetings and group discussions. These organised in various locations in Haryana (including villages) and in Jaipur, Rajasthan (in more urban locations). They included different social class and caste<sup>1</sup> contexts and they included projects that had been running for a number of months or more, as well as visits to projects at the earliest orientation stages.. In this way, it was possible to explore the value added by KBC in very different contexts and to explore these impacts

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<sup>11</sup> [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

over time. The importance of tailoring KBC interventions for these different contexts will emerge from the discussions to follow.

In summary, this article explores the findings within a Theory of Change framework, taking account of the projects' impacts and reflecting upon:

- What works?
- For whom/ which groups?
- In which contexts? And why?

## Findings

### **KBC Impacts on Young People, Boys as well as Girls**

The discussions revealed evidence on the ways in which young people had been gaining in confidence, knowledge and understanding, in general, raising their aspirations for the future. This applied across the different contexts visited, in both urban and rural areas.

There was also specific evidence of young people's increased knowledge and understanding of the issues involved in violence against women and girls (VAW)<sup>2</sup>. This included understanding of the ways in which teasing impacts upon girls' abilities to go about, for example, recognising that this is but one end of the spectrum of violence, a form of harassment that nevertheless significantly limits the lives of women and girls. And this included evidence of learning about gender inequalities more generally. KBC activities, such as charting the different ways in which boys and girls use their time, brought out such inequalities only too clearly, for example, showing how much less free time girls have because of the need to help with domestic duties, fetching water and preparing vegetables, for instance. We were able to see the charts of these activities, displayed on the resource centre wall.

This increased understanding applied to boys as well as to girls. The Participatory Safety Audits (PSAs<sup>3</sup>) marked such differences out very effectively, as the maps illustrated the places where boys and girls

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<sup>2</sup> VAW- Violence against women

<sup>3</sup> PSA (*Participatory Safety Audit*) is an activity which helps in mapping a given area and making it with safe, unsafe and moderate places. The maps are created separately by girls and boys to give a more depth knowledge of all the places and the issues lurking there and what can be done to resolve them. The data is then shared with the concerned authorities like Police, Gram Panchayat, Ward Parshad, etc.

respectively felt safe – far fewer places for the girls, (perhaps unsurprisingly), as we could see from the maps, ourselves. For some of the boys this was a real eye opener, though, increasing their understanding of the ways in which girls' freedom of movement was being restricted as a result.

The Participatory Safety Audits emerged as centrally important too, in terms of enabling young people to take up the issues that arose as a result. One of the issues that emerged in a number of contexts was the issue of street lighting, or more precisely the lack of street lighting in relevant places, for instance. Young people had successfully taken up these issues and met with positive responses, in both urban and rural contexts (although there were also instances of promises that had yet to be fulfilled)

Both boys and girls spoke of their enjoyment of KBC activities. As one of the young people expressed this:

*'I loved going out for KBC activities, and learning more about girls and women. I love to be in this group because we have fun'.*

This links to another important aspect of young people's learning. Involvement with KBC was raising girls' aspirations. Girls were expressing interest in continuing their studies, aspiring to go on to train to become teachers and social workers, for example. These raised aspirations were expressed across very different contexts, from relatively poor urban communities in Jaipur to villages in Haryana.

Teachers provided corroboration here. *'KBC has improved the confidence of the students and they are behaving well in school with other students and teachers'*, they explained. And most importantly *'the drop out is comparatively less'* amongst the girls, as a result. Young people were particularly appreciative of the arts, including drama, videos and song, activities that were enjoyable in their own right, as well as providing wider learning opportunities. This was evidenced, for example, by our visit to a school where a video was being played as part of the orientation process. One hundred and sixty two young people sat transfixed by this video, showing a play about different aspects of violence against women. This led to a lively discussion with the young people involved,

particularly the girls. Traditional attitudes were being vigorously challenged, as I could appreciate for myself, despite the language barriers.

There was also evidence that these changes in attitude were being accompanied by some changes in behaviour. A young man explained that he now helped his mother in the home with household chores, for instance. His mother had arthritis and he had come to appreciate how much she really needed his help.

As another boy explained, in parallel

*“I have 5 sisters, and none of them were allowed to do anything’ (before his involvement with KBC). Through this involvement ‘I have learned how to respect women. I told my parents the same and the situation at my home has changed completely. Now all my sisters are continuing their education and taking up jobs’ he concluded.*

There were, in addition, examples to illustrate the ways in which KBC interventions could be shared and spread more widely. For instance, a group of college boys in Jaipur concluded our discussions with them by planning their facebook project. This was to be widely accessible beyond the college, providing information on where and how to take up issues of violence against women and girls. There were comparable examples from the rural areas that we visited. Girls were similarly spreading the word amongst class mates from other villages, sharing their learning and their involvement with processes of social change.

Before concluding that life is being totally transformed amongst young people in these project areas however, a note of realism needs to be included at this point. We identified plenty of evidence of change. As subsequent sections demonstrate, KBC interventions had been central to these processes. But there was also evidence of how much more remained to be achieved. We met with girls who had dropped out of school against their will, as a result of pressures from families and social circumstances, for example, and we heard of raised aspirations that were being frustrated.

Attitudes and behaviours do not transform in days, or even months. KBC staff were very aware of the need for such realism, recognising the importance of

valuing incremental changes, fewer and later child marriages for example (at twelve or fourteen instead of eight or nine, for instance) as steps in the direction of ending this practice altogether. The depth of KBC staff understanding and their flexibility in the face of local circumstances emerged as key factors in KBC's success.

### **The Impact of KBC on Families and Communities**

The meetings and discussions provided evidence of the impact of KBC interventions on families and communities, too. And again these illustrations of changed attitudes applied in both urban and rural contexts.

Just to give one example here, we met with mothers in a Jaipur community. One of them explained why – as a result of involvement with KBC, - she now allowed her daughters to go out more freely. And she explained how she had responded when her neighbours had questioned her about this. She had given her neighbours the reasons – and they seemed to be listening to her as a result.

There were similar examples from rural contexts too. Girls referred to changing attitudes amongst neighbours who had initially taunted them, but were now more understanding. The mothers that we met in this context were also very positive, telling us that attitudes were changing amongst all but a minority of their community, mostly older people who were finding it more difficult to accept these forms of social change. I could feel their enthusiasm, despite the language barriers involved.

Whilst celebrating these achievements however, here too there needs to be recognition of the remaining barriers to change. Mothers referred to the importance of taking account of their husbands' concerns for their daughters' safety, for instance. Such anxieties were deeply rooted in their cultural norms.

### **The Impact of KBC on organisations and structures of governance**

The meetings and discussions also yielded information on the impact of KBC, in terms of opening up and strengthening communications between communities and service providers. There were examples of more positive interactions with colleges and schools, health services providers and structures of local governance. The most surprising illustrations came from the police, however, an unanticipated finding given previous reports of the tensions between communities and those that police them in other contexts, both in India and elsewhere.

In both Jaipur and Haryana the police provided explanations of their support for KBC as a means of building more constructive relationships with communities. It seemed that protection officers had felt unable to visit communities at all, unless accompanied by a posse of bodyguards in the past. But this had changed for the better. As a senior police officer had explained, *'The relation between police and community was bitter due to lack of awareness of the police work and rights. With PRIA's intervention, the community now trusts the police and their work'*.

The orientation that had been presented by the (PRIA) staff had been particularly useful, women police officers had explained, in addition. It had been

*'true that families are scared and unaware of their rights because of which they are harassed more'*.

But this situation had been changed as a result of KBC's interventions. There were instances where women and girls were now coming forward to the police to report incidents as a result of these changed relationships, as one of the women police officers recounted. As she explained,

*'the women are feeling comfortable while coming to us (women police officers) with their problems'*.

We saw evidence of such changed attitudes ourselves when we arrived for a community meeting. The place was buzzing, discussing an incident that had just taken place. This had involved three boys on motor cycles, following a girl, harassing her. The people around about had supported the girl and the

case had been reported to the police, who had responded promptly, arresting the main perpetrator.

Subsequently, in the same community, a community leader identified their interactions with the police as the highlight of that community's involvement with KBC so far. They had taken the findings from the Participatory Safety Audit to the police to raise safety concerns. And they had been listened to, he had felt.. The community had previously feared the police and they had confronted their fears. If the police could come to speak to communities like these, the communities' fears of the police could be diminished, he suggested.

Whilst the police emerged as very much on side in both contexts, the police also recognised the continuing challenges, however. If more women and girls come forward, then crime statistics increase rather than decrease, raising potential concerns amongst decision makers and the wider public, they explained. But in both localities the police were clear that this was an issue that needed to be understood. As a senior officer explained, the taboo on '*women going to the police*' is reducing. '*The crimes being reported are going up in numbers, but this is a good sign as women are now coming out (to the police) with their problems*'.

Increased reporting was being seen as positive then, and women and girls needed to have the confidence to come forward - although the police did also comment upon the problem of false accusations (estimated by one senior officer as representing between 50-60% of cases). This question of 'false accusations' is, of course, contentious, as other research studies have been demonstrating.

### **Discussion: so what works, for whom, in which contexts and why?**

The Participatory Safety Audits were singled out in each location as being particularly instructive, providing key learning for those involved. Sports activities were also identified across the board, along with the arts activities.

The activities were very much enjoyed. And they provided learning opportunities for the young people concerned, offering ways of interacting with each other with mutual respect.

The provision of safe places such as the KBC resource centres emerged as a contributing factor too. This chimed with our own experiences, organising group discussions. Young people seemed far more forthcoming in small groups in safe places such as these resource centres. In contrast, a more open discussion (which took place with us in the open air) was – unsurprisingly - considerably less productive in terms of eliciting young people's stories.

In summary then, it seemed clear that each aspect of KBC's interventions had relevance and value. But activities needed to be planned and sequenced to take account of particular contexts. Participatory Safety Audits had value in varying contexts for instance, but not necessarily in any particular sequence of planned events. KBC is not a rigid package at all – rather a box of tools to be applied, as appropriate, in particular circumstance, as it will be suggested in more detail subsequently.

### **For whom, in which contexts?**

KBC has evidently been making significant impacts in very different contexts. This applies to working with young people and their families and communities in rural as well as in urban contexts, with middle class communities as well as with poorer communities. It may be that KBC works better though – and faster – where there have been pre-existing elements of interest, both amongst young people and their communities. Most significantly there seemed evidence that pre-existing relationships of trust had been key, both relationships of trust with PRIA staff and volunteers and relationships with supportive community leaders.

Some contexts seemed more challenging than others, though. On the plus side, for example, pre-election periods seemed to have offered opportunities for eliciting commitments from politicians and policy makers, encouraging them to respond to community needs. Conversely however, communities

could be pre-occupied with their most immediate problems, impacting on their willingness to engage with KBC (as in the case of one community where substance abuse had been a major pre-occupation, for instance). KBC staff provided evidence of particular knowledge and skills here, adapting KBC interventions accordingly.

### **And why?**

Firstly, but by no means most importantly, KBC interventions have been able to build upon situations where there may have been pre-existing potential for change. Individuals may already have had some interest in making a difference. Similar issues may also apply to institutions and structures. This was illustrated by the police for instance - wanting to engage with communities more productively but struggling to achieve this. So KBC was intervening on already fertile ground in some such cases. This is in no way to devalue KBC's contributions (on the contrary) but simply to recognise the significance of context both for individuals and for organisations and structures.

Relationships of trust emerged as centrally important too. KBC staff had been building relationships of trust with communities over a number of years, many years in some cases. People – and organisations – already knew and trusted PRIA. And so they were prepared to engage in what must have been quite risky ventures for some of those involved. Allowing girls and boys to interact together meant going against the grain of local cultures, and especially so in rural contexts in Haryana, for instance. It is difficult, if not impossible, to envisage KBC making such impacts – with such speed in some cases - without such pre-existing relationships of trust.

For me, the most significant factors to emerge were the qualities of PRIA staff themselves. This was evident from the ways in which people were responding to them, in their local communities, as we could see for ourselves. PRIA staff knew how to cope with challenges, just as they knew how to engage communities on the issues of most immediate local concern. Far from

treating KBC as a rigid programme from on high, they were skilled in applying the tools from the KBC tool box, tailoring their interventions to local circumstances. So, for example, rather than focusing upon violence against women from the outset, in one particular rural context, staff had started by addressing more immediate concerns about the lack of access to water nearby. Having supported the community in addressing this particular problem they had then been able to move on, to explore the implications for women and girls more specifically (women and girls being the ones responsible for fetching water).

KBC staff's commitment was also impressive. There had even been times when they had worked without pay when funding had been restricted, thereby demonstrating the depth of this commitment to their local communities.

### **Conclusions**

KBC has developed and tested innovative ways of engaging young people and their communities, addressing violence against women and girls, promoting processes of democratic social change. The co-production of participatory evaluation frameworks could enable the learning from these experiences to be shared more systematically -between young people and their communities, whilst taking account of their varying contexts and tailoring evaluations accordingly. And the learning could be shared with public service providers, with the aim of mainstreaming more effective ways of engaging with communities, promoting more participatory agendas for social justice and social change.

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