



THE STRENGTH WITHIN

Observing International Girl Child Day, 2021, with domestic workers and their daughters

Date: 11th October 2021

Locations: (Pawti) Panipat, (Harijan Basti) Gurugram, Ranchi

Total Number of Participants: 106

“If one man can destroy everything then why can’t one girl change it?”

-Malala Yousafzai

Introduction

The International Girl Child Day is observed every year on the 11th of October to bring focus to the growth and development of girls around the world, particularly their access to their rights, to safety, education and healthcare. Its history dates back to a conference in Beijing in 1995, where it was discussed that a day dedicated to the growth of girls around the world was the need of the hour. It not only separated the girl child from the umbrella of ‘women’ but also sought to recognise and address their specific and separate needs. Hence, the countries (including India) unanimously agreed and adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The global theme for International Girl Child Day 2021 was ‘Digital generation. Our generation’, and aimed at targeting the gender gap for global internet users, particularly girls, who face multiple and layered challenges to accessing the Internet. At a time of the global pandemic, when Internet access is a necessary gateway to children actualising their aspirations and unlocking their potential, addressing these challenges takes precedence in order to achieve the global Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate gender inequalities.

About Kadam Badhate Chalo

Kadam Badhate Chalo, a flagship program of the Martha Farrell Foundation, is a youth-led initiative that engages adolescents and in partnership with them, aims to counter sexual and gender-based violence in their communities. Through the program, adolescents of all genders participate in a range of activities to stimulate dialogue and critical reflection to end Violence Against Women And Girls, and thereby reduce systemic gender inequalities.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Foundation distributed mobile phones to 35 adolescent girls in Harijan Basti in Gurgaon and Dwarka in Delhi, to enable them to access online classes and pursue their ambitions. Through participatory dialogues held in each location, we learned that for young girls, being able to access mobile phones of



their own was a novel experience. Many girls said they felt safe for the first time in their lives, as they could keep in touch with their families and friends while traveling the unsafe roads and streets of their communities to pursue activities.

The conversations also revealed another key challenge that the girls were facing: the lack of spaces - digital or physical - to express themselves and to think about their futures and aspirations independently, or with their families.

Taking these learnings forward, on this International Girl Child Day, the Foundation supported adolescents to create safe spaces across the three locations where the Kadam Badhate Chalo program is currently active, where they could express their opinions on critical issues that impact and shape their lives and envision their future roles and contributions to society at large. In each location, adolescents planned a separate set of activities to actualise this space and express themselves.

Harijan Basti, Gurgaon

In Gurugram's Harijan Basti, adolescent girls expressed a need for open, safe and heartfelt conversations about their aspirations with their mothers. Most families in the communities are migrants from states across North India. Women of the families are proud earners and equal partners in family systems and work as domestic workers in the high rise condominiums surrounding the community. The nature of their work is such that the women and their daughters had never had such a conversation before.

With the Foundation's support, nearly 35 adolescent girls and their mothers met at the Swabhiman Kendra, a Resource and Support Center for and by women domestic workers to have this conversation for the first time in their lives.

"We spend so much time with our mothers, but we don't have real conversations with them. I think we should have more such spaces to talk with each other." - Shivani, 14-year-old

Domestic workers who were part of the conversation opened up about their own aspirations, as well. For many of them, their daughters' aspirations and dreams served a reminder of the things they had wanted to do in their lives. Through the Swabhiman Kendra, today, all the women are supporting one another to achieve these aspirations.

The current conversation also pushed them to redouble their resolve to support their daughters in the same way to achieve their aspirations.

"I will do everything in my power for you to achieve your dream," said Rozena, a domestic worker, to her 12-year-old daughter. "I want you to have a better life than I did. I want you to study hard and become successful."

Women domestic workers also shed light on how they are overcoming social pressures to support and hone their daughters' futures.

“When we were younger, we never had the kind of opportunities that we wanted. We couldn’t even raise our voices in front of our parents. My parents got me married very young, even though I wanted to study further. But I want my daughter Jyoti to have a bright future and do incredibly well for herself,” said Sarita Devi, about her 18-year-old daughter, Jyoti.



In Harijan Basti, Gurugram, domestic workers and their daughters use art as a medium to hold conversations about their aspirations and futures.

Ranchi, Jharkhand

On International Girl Child Day, Kadam Badhate Chalo Fellows in Ranchi envisioned a space where they used art as a form of expression and a starting point for conversations on girls’ access to education, digital literacy and safety and security. The session was organised in collaboration with ASHA, a non-profit organisation working with children and women in Jharkhand. ASHA is a former winner of the Martha Farrell Award and a partner organisation implementing the Foundation’s Kadam Badhate Chalo fellowship programme in Ranchi.

‘Save the Girl Child’ was a key theme that emerged, in line with the Government of India’s national campaign to bring focus to girls’ requirements in the nation’s development agenda.

Adolescents had a stimulating discussion on girls’ right to education and its role in countering gender discrimination. Girls brought out how an education enabled them to



make informed choices in their lives and become equal contributors to the economy and society.

Another key theme of discussion was digital literacy. A participant said, *“In the digital-first world of today, depriving children of access to digital spaces and technology is akin to depriving us of the chance to find an equal footing in society.”*

Participants also captured the essence of the discussion in the form of *rangolis* (folk art form of drawing), and discussed their aspirations and dreams for a more gender equal world.

“My dream is to travel the world, and I do not want anyone to stop me from achieving it. I want every household to treat girls and boys equally,” said Sanjana, a 14-year-old participant.



Kadam Badhate Chalo Fellows in Ranchi use Rangolis to create awareness about key issues that impact and shape the lives of the girl child.

Panipat

In Panipat, adolescents organised a multi-stakeholder event to observe International Girl Child Day. Along with adolescents, their teachers too, were present for the discussion, which was facilitated by Ms. Rajni Gupta, the Protection Officer (Ministry of Women and Child Development) for the district.



The focus of the discussion was to shed light on the contextual challenges that adolescent girls in Panipat face, including Haryana's skewed sex ratio, child marriage and extreme lack of safety in public, private and professional spheres.

The facilitator and the participants discussed the impacts of such practices and situations on the psychosocial health of adolescent girls, their increased vulnerability to violence in the home and in public, higher dropout rates from school, and mental and physical health consequences.

Through the conversation, each participant also became aware of their role in prevention and prohibition of the practice of child marriage, and its impact on children of all genders, and not just girls.

“Madam, I wasn't aware that attending a child marriage is also a crime. I will make sure that whenever a school student invites us to their marriage, we'll ask their age before attending. If they are under the legal age, we will report it,” said one school teacher.

Thanking the facilitator, a student said, *“I am glad that I got to know about our legal rights when it comes to child marriage. In our lives, it has been such a normalised occurrence, that none of us tend to oppose it, or raise our voices against it.”*



In Panipat, Kadam Badhate Chalo fellows and adolescents from the local schools attend a sensitisation session on the evils of child marriage facilitated by the District Protection Officer, Ms. Rajni Gupta

Key Learnings



Across the three locations, the events that unfolded focused on a core theme: fostering the strength within and enabling young girls with an understanding of their rights. Each event format drew critical learnings:

- Facilitating conversations between adolescents and their mothers emerged a strong strategic tool to bring about an experiential understanding of the myriad challenges that continue to impede the growth and development of young girls
- Using art as a medium for expression has proven to be extremely effective in fostering conversations on gender-based discrimination and violence. Art as a medium invited nuanced reflections based on personal experiences that also drew localised and nuanced solutions from the participants themselves
- Solutions driven by the community impacted by challenges are more nuanced, more relevant and likely to be more effective. Through multi-stakeholder dialogue, such effective solutions can emerge that are practical and have a strong stakeholder buy-in.