

MERI ABHILASHA

EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN

An initiative supported by DSP Asset Managers Pvt. Ltd.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|----------|------------------------------|----|
| 1 | INTRODUCTION: MERI ABHILASHA | 2 |
| 2 | PROJECT LOCATIONS | 3 |
| 3 | ACTIVITIES & OUTREACH | 4 |
| 4 | IMPACT: ADOLESCENT LEADERS | 6 |
| 5 | IMPACT: SCHOOLS | 12 |
| 6 | IMPACT : MOTHERS | 15 |
| 7 | KEY LEARNINGS & INSIGHTS | 16 |
| 8 | TARGETS ACHIEVED | 17 |
| 9 | UTILISATION OF GRANTS | 18 |

INTRODUCTION: MERI ABHILASHA

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, there was a 27% increase in cases related to crimes against women between 2020 and 2021, which includes 1,716 rape incidents reported in 2021 as compared to 1,373 in 2020 in Haryana.

The Martha Farrell Foundation's (MFF) previous work and experiences of working with adolescents across India have underscored that they are going through significant changes. Norms and behaviours, based on entrenched patriarchy, limit adolescents, especially girls, in their participation and mobility in schools and public areas due to insecurity, sexual harassment, and violence, preventing them from attaining their full potential. Despite laws, regulations, and institutions intended to promote gender equality and safety, educational spaces continue to be gender-blind, with boys and girls failing to learn and practice equal gender relations. Safety is a growing concern, forcing many girls to drop out of formal education systems.

In 2019, MFF conducted a survey in Haryana with 944 students studying in 10 government schools; 69% girls of surveyed said that they wanted to pursue higher education, but were unable to do so due to the lack of resources, information, and family support to continue their education. As per these students, their school environments were also hostile and discriminatory. The data makes it evident that there is an urgent need to foster and build safe, gender-just and empowering spaces for girls at schools.

Meri Abhilasha: Equality and Empowerment for Girls and Women, supported by DSP Asset Managers Pvt. Ltd., focuses on empowering girls using an integrated system approach to create a safe space for their growth and empowerment.

The project aims to do this in three ways:

- Increase adolescents' and young people's (girls and boys) understanding on sexual and gender-based violence
- Address school dropouts by strengthening school systems and commitments towards safety, by putting in place safeguards that make them a conducive environment for learning
- Engage with boys and men, along with girls and women, to create an environment for adolescents where they can question existing gender norms that perpetuate violence and they can speak out about violence

Keeping the lived experiences of adolescent girls at the forefront of its strategy, design, and implementation, this unique project implements an inclusive and resilient model of recovery, growth, and empowerment, not only building the capacities of adolescent girls through awareness, voice, and space, but also actively working with adolescent boys to make them understand and practice equal gender relations, so that they emerge as strong allies in combating sexual and gender-based violence.

PROJECT LOCATIONS

PANIPAT



Panipat is one of the 22 districts of Haryana. According to the 2011 census, Panipat district has a population of 1,205,437, of which 556,487 are female, thus giving a sex ratio of 861 females for every 1000 males.

The average literacy rate in the district is 77.5% - the male literacy rate is 85.4% and the female literacy rate is 68.2%. As per information from various government sources, the problem of dropping out of schools is common for girls in the district, primarily due to safety reasons.

Within Panipat District, the project focused on Panipat City and Samalkha town.

GURUGRAM

Gurugram is one of the 22 districts of Haryana, which has a population of 1,514,085, according to the 2011 census. The sex ratio in the district is 853 females per 1000 males, one of the lowest in the state.

The average literacy rate in the district is 87.5%, one of the highest in the state. The male literacy rate is 90.9% and the female literacy rate is 83.5%.



Gurugram also has 30,888 slums, which house over 16% of the district's population. One such slum is Harijan Basti, which has an estimated population of 25,000, with 4,000 households.

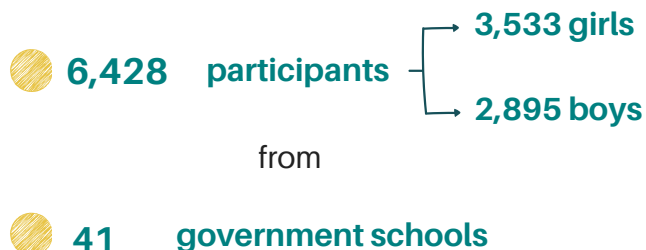
Lack of safety, high crime rates, lack of access to formal education and affordable healthcare, and water and sanitation issues have severe impacts on the well-being and development of residents of the Basti, especially women and girls.

ACTIVITIES & OUTREACH

PANIPAT



Orientation workshops, focusing on gender, gender stereotypes, and gender-based violence, held for



The sessions also offered information on child sexual abuse and their rights under the on the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, including information on reporting and redressal mechanisms.



250 teachers and principals from 120 government schools

Trained on the prevention of child sexual abuse and their roles in creating safe learning spaces.



800 self-nominated leaders

- 400 girls
- 400 boys

Trained to recognise gender-based violence and educated on their rights for protection against sexual abuse.



60 sessions

Held with adolescent leaders on understanding sexual and gender-based violence, along with the reporting mechanisms for protection and redressal under the POCSO Act.



40 members of the Child Protection Committees

From partner schools trained intensively on the POCSO Act, reporting mechanisms, handling disclosures of violence cases, and fostering safe and inclusive educational spaces.



8 survivor circles facilitated with 100 mothers

For women to express their experiences of sexual and gender-based violence.

GURUGRAM



50 self-nominated adolescent girls

Trained to recognise gender-based violence and educated on their rights for protection against sexual abuse.



1 Swabhiman Kendra

A safe space where conversations on gender, gender-based violence, and child sexual abuse could take place.



2 campaigns

Initiated by the adolescent leaders.

The **#AisaKyun** campaign, held during the 16 Days of Activism, where leaders challenging gender-based stereotypes through art.

The **#SafeHoli** campaign saw adolescents and their mothers discuss their experiences of violence during the festival of Holi and demand for change in their communities.



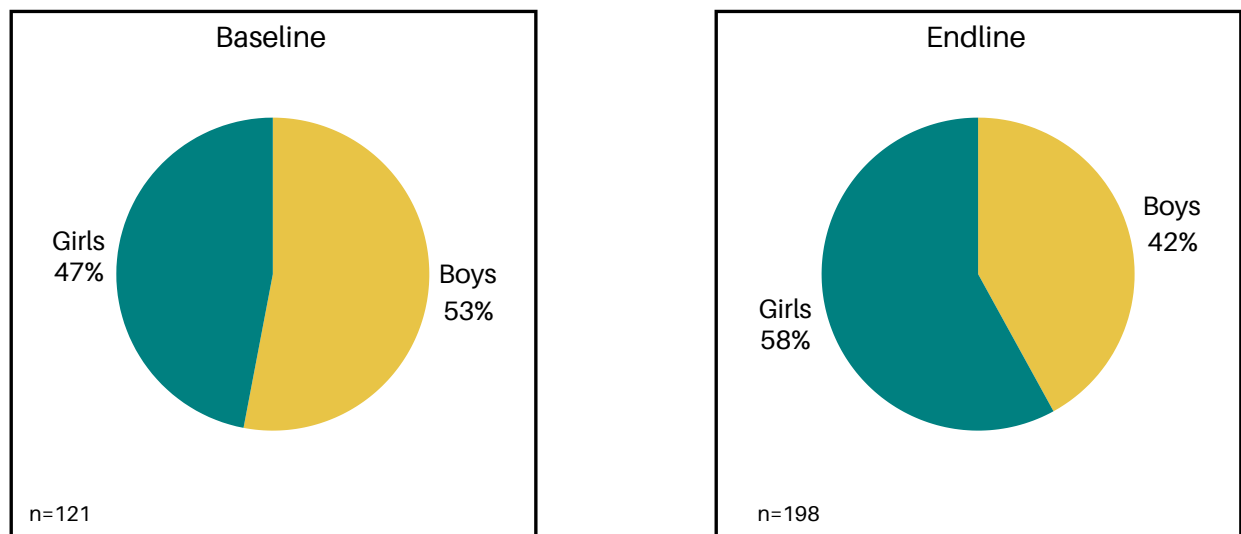
1 health camp

Organised for adolescents and their mothers by a doctor from their local Primary Health Centre (PHC), who conducted health checkups, and gave more information on the free services offered by PHCs.



To measure the impact of the project activities carried out in Panipat district, a comprehensive baseline and endline survey was conducted with a sample of adolescent leaders from 20 schools that were part of the project. 121 adolescents (47% girls) participated in the baseline, and 198 (58% girls) participated in the endline.

GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



The survey consisted of 8 statements, designed to quantitatively assess the participant's gender sensitivity, and understanding of gender-based violence. Paper-based survey forms, with questions written in Hindi, were distributed to participants. Participants were encouraged to answer all questions honestly. The survey forms were anonymous, and participants did not have to write their name on the survey forms - only their age, school and gender were to be noted. Project staff were available for any assistance they needed. Once these forms were received, project staff digitised the responses on Google Forms, for analysis purposes.

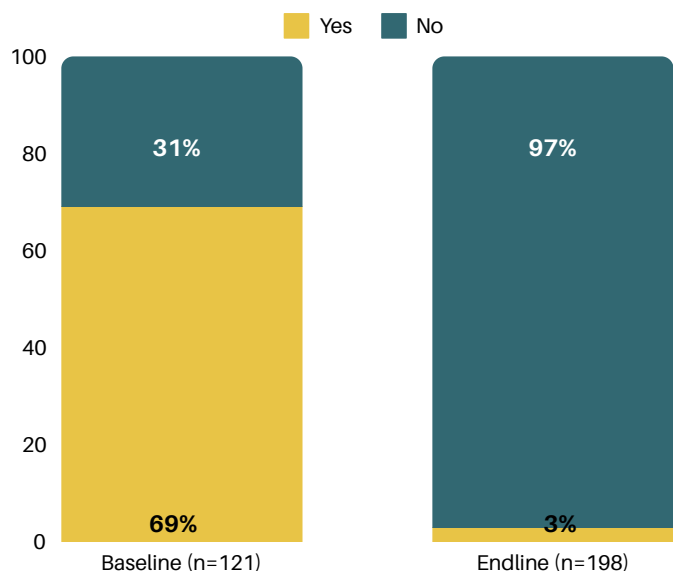
The baseline data was collected in August 2023, before the start of the training sessions, and endline data was collected in March 2023.

To add voice to the quantitative data collected through the surveys, qualitative data was also collected. This included short interviews conducted with participants at the end of the training sessions, and key informant interviews with those adolescents showing the most change conducted at the end of the project.



1. NOT WEARING REVEALING CLOTHES REDUCES THE CHANCES FOR WOMEN OF BEING SEXUALLY HARASSED

There persists a misconception in society that a woman's choice of clothing invites sexual harassment, ultimately serving as a catalyst for violence against them. However, experiences and research have shown that one's clothing choices do not make them a more likely target for sexual harassment. Further, such statements put the onus on the victim, rather than holding the perpetrator accountable for their actions.



69% of students (64% boys and 36% girls) who participated in the baseline believed that if women wore modest clothing, they would not be sexually harassed. This indicated an existing strong prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes among adolescents.

However, at the endline, the results showed that this number had changed significantly, with only 3% (60% boys and 40% girls) still believing this to be true, and 97% of adolescents understanding that this statement is false.



Sahil is a class 9 student from Government Senior Secondary School, Jaurasi (Samalkha) and has been a part of the Meri Abhilasha project for the past year.

Sahil recalls his most memorable session which focused on gender awareness through sports and games. "That day, I realised how prevalent gender bias is in our society, even in the lyrics of contemporary songs, which often portray girls in a derogatory manner," Sahil says.

Sahil contributes his new awareness about popular culture to the programme; he has gradually stopped listening to popular songs that normalise harassment.

"I've witnessed gender bias both in my village and in cities," he says. "People often pass judgments based on how boys and girls dress, despite it being a personal choice."

He says that he used to judge girls based on their clothing too, but not anymore. Through the training sessions, he has learnt that individual choices must be respected, and gender-based discrimination cannot be tolerated. He recalled an incident when he intervened in an argument where some people were judging a girl's attire in his locality, but his father stopped him from getting involved. "That day, I realised that violence starts in our minds, through our words and actions," he says.

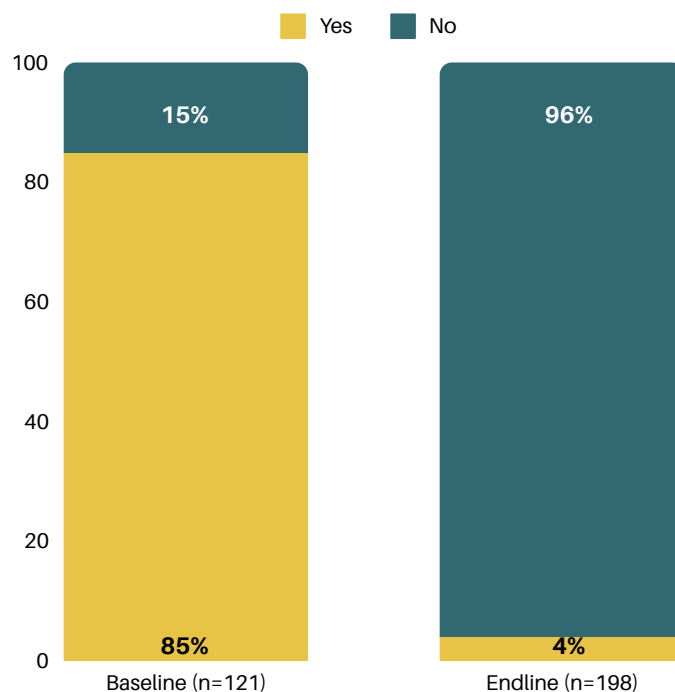
He has also learnt that clothing and style are not gendered. For instance, he used to hesitate to grow his hair long because he feared ridicule, because long hair is associated with women. However, he recently started to grow his hair out, and is not ashamed. Even though some of his friends have mocked him, he has been resolute in his decision, accepting his individuality.

2. WOMEN'S SMOKING AND DRINKING INVITES SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The belief that women who smoke and drink alcohol are more prone to sexual harassment is a stereotypical notion deeply ingrained in the patriarchal society. The assumption is that women who indulge in such activities are morally loose, and hence are not worthy of being respected. Again, such stereotypes tend to put the blame of the harassment and violence on the victim, rather than placing the accountability of the act with the perpetrator.

At the baseline, 85% of the participants (56% boys and 44% girls) believed that women who smoked and drank alcohol are more likely to experience sexual harassment than those who do not. This data, coupled with findings from the previous question, indicates the extent to which victim-blaming attitudes and thinking persists.

At the endline, however, this number had reduced significantly with only 4% (25% boys and 75% girls) believing that women's smoking and drinking habits contributing to harassment, and 96% believing that there was no correlation between women's personal habits and sexual harassment.



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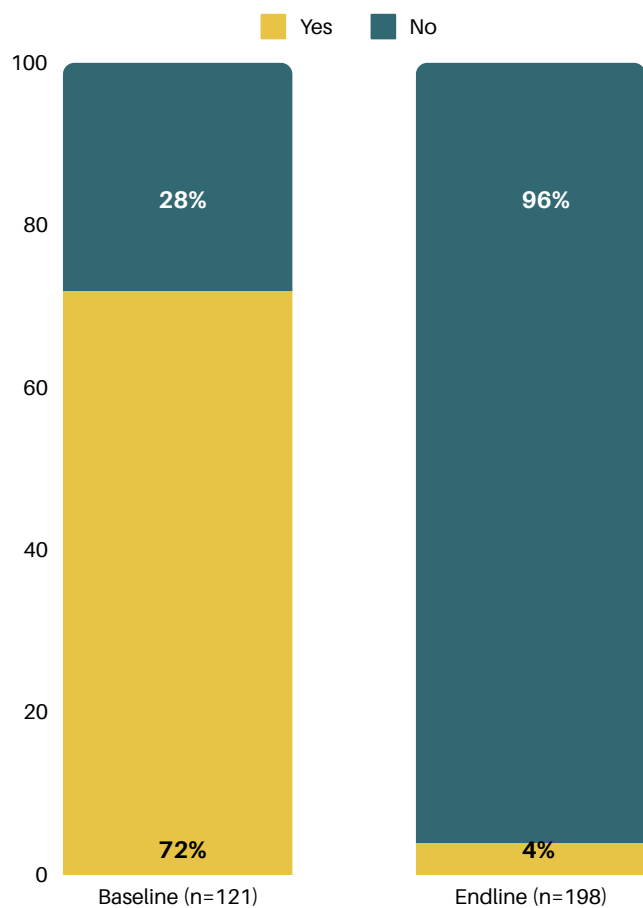
I have gained an understanding of women's and girls' rights, previously unknown to me. The sessions opened up conversation on challenges we face daily, often unnoticed. I've realised that societal norms perpetuate inequalities, affecting all genders differently. From learning about the disconnect between clothing and harassment to recognising the violence and discrimination faced by boys as well, these sessions have empowered me to challenge societal norms and advocate for a more inclusive future.

Anushka, 17 years old

Government Senior Secondary School
Dhodpur, Panipat

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3. MENSTRUATION IS A PRIVATE MATTER, IT SHOULD NOT BE DISCUSSED OPENLY



Taboos around menstruation are one of the leading forms of discrimination among women and girls the world over. Every month 1.8 billion people around the world menstruate, yet access to water, sanitation and hygiene products remain lacking for a majority of women and girls.

In schools in India, lack of water, soap and doors on toilets makes menstrual hygiene management a difficult task for many girls, which causes them to skip or drop-out of school. Discriminatory practices, stigma, silence and taboos around menstruation can lead to long-lasting gender inequalities, including in access to education.

At the baseline, 72 % of participants (54% boys and 46% girls) felt that menstruation is a private matter and should not be discussed in public. However, by the endline, this statistic improved significantly, with only 4% of participants (71% boys and 29% girls) feeling this way; 96% believed that menstruation should be discussed openly and taboos around it should be removed.

“

The sessions made me realise that girls have the power to stand up for themselves in challenging situations. Previously, I was hesitant to go out alone, but now I am aware of my rights and feel empowered to address injustice in society. The sessions have boosted my confidence significantly and I feel resilient and determined to bring a positive change in my school and society.

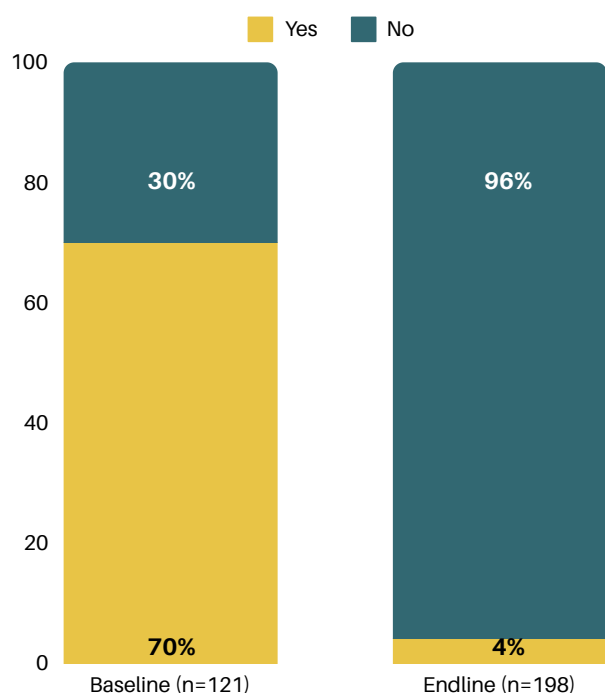
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Esha, 14 years old

Government Girls Senior Secondary School
Jaurasi Village, Panipat



4. TO STOP VIOLENCE FROM HAPPENING, ONE SHOULD FIRMLY AND LOUDLY SAY 'NO'



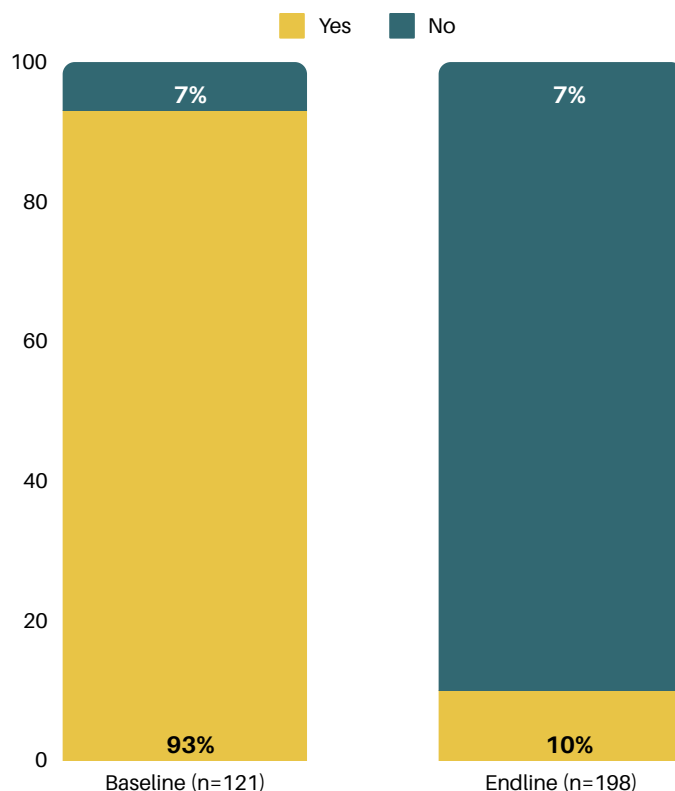
The idea that saying “no” or shouting can prevent violence reflects how society views consent in black and white terms, overlooking the complexities of power dynamics and the various ways in which violence can occur. To believe that a loud ‘no’ will prevent violence not only disregards the ways in which gender-based violence occurs, but also creates a ‘model’ victim; a failure to express ‘no’ or an absence of a ‘no’ does not imply consent.

The interventions in this project aimed to address such thinking and shift the responsibility from the survivor to the perpetrator. At the baseline, 70% of participants (60% boys and 40% girls) believed the statement to be true. At the endline, however, 96% of participants (75% boys and 25% girls) understood the complexities of consent, and did not believe that a loud ‘no’ can prevent violence.

5. YOUNG CHILDREN ARE MORE ATTACHED TO THEIR MOTHERS; HENCE, A MOTHER SHOULD GIVE MORE IMPORTANCE TO HER CHILD THAN HER CAREER

This statement is based on traditional gender roles, which assigns caregiving responsibilities to women. These gendered roles are deeply ingrained in society, putting the entire onus of child rearing on mothers, and absolving fathers of their parental duties. Such roles also limit women’s opportunities and reemphasising unequal power dynamics within relationships and households, and ascribes women’s identities to their motherhood, denying them their individuality.

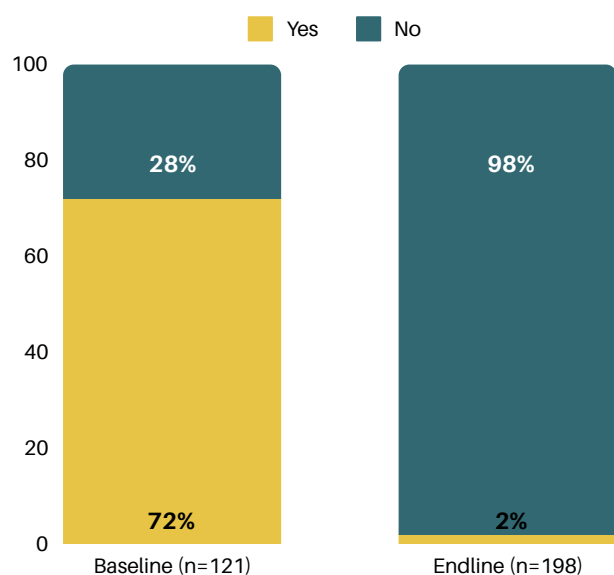
At the baseline, 93% of participants (51% boys and 49% girls) of participants believed that young children are more attached to their mothers, and therefore mothers should prioritise their child over their careers. However, at the endline, only 10% of participants agreed to this statement (89% boys and 11% girls), with 90% believing that men and women should share child rearing responsibilities.



6. THERE ARE PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT THINKINGS ON SOCIAL MEDIA; HENCE GIRLS SHOULD NOT POST PERSONAL PHOTOS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

According to global data from Plan International, 58% of girls and young women have experienced some form of online harassment. In societies where gender inequality is deeply entrenched, societal views deem that limiting girls' and women's access to online platforms can be a way to prevent online harassment, thus putting the onus of violence on them, rather than on perpetrators.

It creates a culture where girls are made to feel responsible for the negative experiences they encounter online, further marginalising them and diminishing their sense of agency and autonomy in digital spaces. The high prevalence of online gender-based violence only serves to limit girls' freedom of expression and increases the digital gender divide.



At the baseline, 72% of participants (61% boys and 39% girls) felt that girls should not post photos on social media, as it would invite sexual harassment (including comments, stalking etc.).

However, at the endline 98% (51% boys and 49% girls) of participants agreed that social media is for everyone, and all should have the freedom to post their pictures, irrespective of their gender.

“The sessions made me aware of the inequalities girls face in our society, and empowered me to advocate for change. The sessions helped me understand that societal biases limit girls' opportunities and freedom. Now, I actively challenge these biases by supporting my family with household chores and promoting inclusivity among my peers.”

Naitik, 14 years old
Government Senior Secondary School
Narayna, Panipat



The impact of the project is also evident in the proactive response of school administrations to concerns of safety raised by adolescent leaders.

Adolescent leaders from 20 schools conducted participatory safety audits of their schools and communities. The adolescent leaders then compiled a list of recommendations based on their findings, and presented them to school authorities to hold their schools accountable and demand for safer learning spaces.



Adolescent leaders from all 20 schools presented their safety audit findings to their respective school authorities.

Following their presentations, various proactive measures were implemented by schools, including:

- Installation of CCTV cameras in **4 schools**, to ensure strong security measures
- Ensuring toilets are clean and safe, including placement of dustbins in washrooms and repairing faulty latches in **15 schools**
- Installation of sanitary pad disposal machines in **3 schools**

The findings of the participatory safety audits sparked critical conversations about safety issues and various forms of violence experienced by adolescents both on their way to school and within school premises.

Some principals have supported students in taking forward these discussions with the police and village councils as well.



Adolescent leaders from two schools in Jaurasi village shared their findings with the village council (Panchayat), advocating to shift the alcohol shop to the other side of the village, or shut the shop during school hours. The Panchayat promised to revoke the tender of the alcohol shop, and relocate the shop away from the school.

Kajal, a class 10 student from Government Girls Senior Secondary school, Jaurasi, has been actively involved in the Meri Abhilasha project for the past year.

Though initially hesitant, she attended the sessions with an eagerness to learn. She gained confidence to challenge societal norms and stand up against gender biases, sharing that “after every session, I used to tell my parents what I was learning. My parents started understanding me better and became more supportive of my aspirations, instead of limiting me to the household chores.”



Inspired by the programme, Kajal and other students organised a stakeholder meeting with their school administration and the village Panchayat, advocating for safety measures in and around the school.

After presenting their safety audit findings and demands for safer schools, she noted a positive change in her school.

She said: “The school took safety measures and formed a Child Protection Committee. We requested the principal to improve toilet facilities, including maintaining their cleanliness and installing a sanitary pad disposal machine. Thankfully, these changes were implemented!

We also convinced the village Sarpanch to remove the liquor shop near the school and he assured us of taking action. I feel proud because these changes were initiated by us students, and I was the one presenting.”

The impact of the project is also evident in the enthusiasm shown and action taken by authorities to ensure that schools are safe learning spaces for all genders, but especially girls.



Of the 41 schools where the intervention was implemented, 20 schools have committed to establishing safe learning spaces, institutionalising policies which emphasise the safety of adolescents, especially girls.

In these 20 schools, robust Child Protection Committees have been formed, with 2 members from each school's committee receiving specialised training on the POCSO Act, reporting mechanisms, handling disclosures of violence, and fostering safe and inclusive educational spaces. Committee members have also created an activity register to document their regular engagements with students on gender-based violence and child sexual abuse.

Further, 17 of the schools have installed complaint boxes, to encourage reporting of instances of violence and safety.

Recognising the importance of ensuring the safety and well-being of students, many teachers have displayed commendable initiative. Some have organised trainings in their respective schools, while others have initiated conversations with the school authorities to create safer spaces.

In 7 schools, teachers have taken the initiative to plan sessions with boys to address issues of gender-based violence and to de-normalise gender-based discrimination. By involving boys in these discussions, the schools aim to create a culture of mutual respect and gender equality, ultimately contributing to the creation of safer and more inclusive learning environments for all students.

“

The sessions facilitated by MFF created a safe space for the boys to openly discuss the concerns about the school. The safety audit helped the boys recognise the challenges faced by girls. Their active participation has helped them develop a deeper understanding of respect and responsibility, which the boys should have, especially regarding their own behaviours.

”



Amit Singh

Principal, Government Senior Secondary School
Jaurasi Village, Panipat

Finally, the project also worked to capacitate adolescents' mothers on gender-based violence, child sexual abuse, and their role in ensuring children's safety. The impact of the survivor's circles on the mothers was evident, with many recognising and articulating their experiences of violence for the first time.



A day-long capacity building training was also facilitated with 100 mothers on reporting mechanisms under the POCSO Act, Sexual Harassment of Women (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. The session was held in the presence of the Protection Officer of Panipat, Haryana - for the first time, these women were able to interact with a Protection Officer, and felt supported in their quest for the creation of safe spaces for themselves and their children.



“

Through the sessions, I was able to reflect on the importance of speaking up against the domestic violence or mistreatment at work. I realised that remaining silent only perpetuates injustice. I believe, as a women, if we can bring life into this world, what greater power exists within us? We are capable of building empires and vanquishing demons just like Durga maa. These sessions empowered me to raise my voice and advocate for the change.

”

Sonia Sharma
Rakshera Village, Samalkha

KEY LEARNINGS & INSIGHTS

Adolescents aspire to better futures for themselves, but societal structures, norms, and economic pressures, along with threats and experiences of violence, prevent them from unlocking their potential to achieve their dreams. The following are some key learnings and insights from the project in the last year:

1 Centring adolescents and amplifying their voice is key. However, they must be meaningfully supported by their families, communities, schools, and other institutions, as they seek to create safe learning spaces for themselves.

The project has presented a good model for the prevention of gender-based violence and child sexual abuse, where adolescents were made aware and empowered, while being supported by parents and holding institutions (schools, governance systems and police) accountable.

Women do not want their children, especially daughters, to be subjected to the same cycle of violence they have experienced, and want to break the chain. Hence, while they want their children to be educated and independent, they are also afraid for their safety.

In this project, a concerted effort was made to create safe spaces for the healing of mothers, and for families to learn to support the agency of adolescent girls.

3 Any work on gender equality in societies and communities requires the critical support of men and boys. However, it is critical that strategies to engage with men and boys must delink them from a perpetrator lens and reframe them as allies.

We found that providing safe spaces where men and boys could engage in difficult conversations and be vulnerable proved to be invaluable.


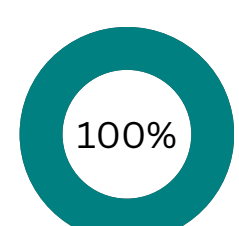
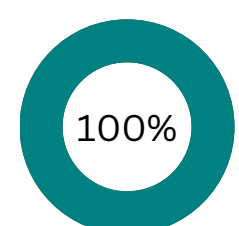
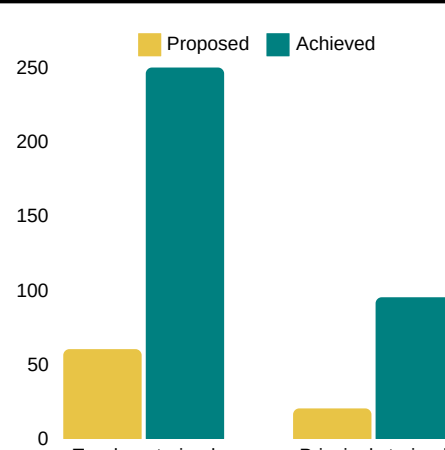
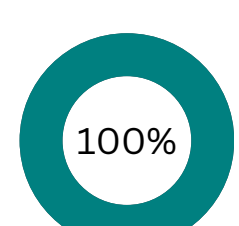
Since conversations around gender will always be challenged, innovative strategies and new partnerships must be sought, in order to appropriately adapt activities.

For example, we were able to engage with schools by also introducing information about the POCSO Act 2012, knowledge and adherence to which is a legal compliance issue, in our existing plan. By doing so, school systems were supported with understanding the Act, while also building an gender.

5 Beyond trainings, handholding support to school authorities is essential for the effective implementation of gender inclusive policies and the building of safe schools. Further, consistent support is necessary to ensure that school authorities do not lose momentum, till they are able to function independently.

Thus, school authorities were provided with a comprehensive toolkit on making schools safer, and further e-learning modules will be provided in the future.

TARGETS ACHIEVED

| Proposed | Progress achieved | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|----------|----------|----------|------------------|------|-------|--------------------|----|----|
| 6000 adolescents from 40 schools will be collectivised and trained to understand gender, gender stereotypes and gender-based violence. | 6400+ adolescents (3533 girls and 2895 boys) from 40+ schools are now aware of gender, gender stereotypes and gender-based violence. |  <p>Proposed Achieved</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Category</th> <th>Proposed</th> <th>Achieved</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Adolescents</td> <td>6000</td> <td>6400+</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> | Category | Proposed | Achieved | Adolescents | 6000 | 6400+ | | | |
| Category | Proposed | Achieved | | | | | | | | | |
| Adolescents | 6000 | 6400+ | | | | | | | | | |
| 120 participatory learning sessions will be conducted with 800 self-nominated leaders from 20 schools. | 120 participatory learning sessions were conducted with 800 self-nominated leaders (400 boys and 400 girls) from 20 schools. |  <p>100%</p> | | | | | | | | | |
| Safety audits will be conducted in 20 schools of the intervened area. | Safety audits were conducted in all 20 schools with 400 adolescent leaders . |  <p>100%</p> | | | | | | | | | |
| Participatory training will be conducted for 60 teachers and 20 principals on building safety in schools, and prevention and reporting of sexual violence under the POCSO Act. | In partnership with the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) Panipat, 250 teachers and 95 government school principals trained on the POCSO Act and building safe and conducive school environments for all. |  <p>Proposed Achieved</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Category</th> <th>Proposed</th> <th>Achieved</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Teachers trained</td> <td>60</td> <td>250</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Principals trained</td> <td>20</td> <td>95</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> | Category | Proposed | Achieved | Teachers trained | 60 | 250 | Principals trained | 20 | 95 |
| Category | Proposed | Achieved | | | | | | | | | |
| Teachers trained | 60 | 250 | | | | | | | | | |
| Principals trained | 20 | 95 | | | | | | | | | |
| 100 mothers of adolescent girls will be collectivised and trained on types of violence, and identifying and reporting instances violence. | 100 mothers of adolescent girls collectivised and 8 survivor circles were facilitated for women to share their thoughts and experiences on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). |  <p>100%</p> | | | | | | | | | |

UTILISATION OF GRANTS

| Line item | Budget | Actual | Utilisation |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Personnel expenses | ₹9,25,000 | ₹9,25,000 | 100% |
| Project expenses | ₹10,45,000 | ₹10,45,000 | 100% |
| Administrative expenses | ₹30,000 | ₹30,000 | 100% |
| Total | ₹20,00,000 | ₹20,00,000 | 100% |



