

## Open Minds, Open Doors

### A Life Skills education Programme by SANJOG

West Bengal marks interesting socio-developmental phenomena in India – despite it being higher in Human Development Index, it also marks 53 % child marriage (NFHS, 05/06) and marked incidence in sex trafficking (NCRB, 2005). An inquiry into the phenomenon (*Where Have All the Flowers Gone, Sanjog, 2010*), observes that the context is affected by multiple economic, social and political factors that makes migration of adolescents an economic necessity, a social alternative for adolescents and an impact of political neglect. NGO response in rural Bengal was poor, thwarted by political activism at the grass-roots which leaves little room for non partisan social movement, limited to welfare schemes, services and more recently – women’s self help groups. In 2006, exploratory inquiries showed (a) rights based programming was weak in the state – an underlying apprehension over confrontation with political systems (b) for NGOs, services to children were limited to education, vocational training courses often unlinked to income generation and (c) quality of education was/is poor, access to quality education is weak – and political influence resulted in lack of accountability of teachers and management. However, adolescents in many cases exercise significant willingness in migration.

Needs assessment for the programme identified beneficiaries as a teenage girl from a family that is in relative or absolute poverty, between 12 to 17 years, 60% of the sample were school drop outs and responsible for domestic work and child care of younger siblings, in waiting for marriage with families often unable to afford dowry, many of them with aspirations of escape from poverty and social restrictions through marriage or migration (with jobs). Communities normalise domestic violence in gender relations, early marriage of girls and early pregnancy are acceptable. Economic migration of adolescent girls, even to other states – due to wage differentials, and families benefiting from remittance are also acceptable. Trafficking or exploitation in migration are interpreted part of the misfortunes/ ill-fate – but not a significant deterrent to economic migration of adolescents. Girls breaking social norms of submissiveness are subject to punishment, humiliation and shaming at home, schools and in their communities. Girls from villages along the Indo-Bangladesh border were subject to sexual harassment from the paramilitary forces who enjoy impunity from civil justice systems.

**Intervention beliefs, strategies and design:** The programme aimed at building skills in negotiation and become willful, active and engaged socio-political actors instead of remaining passive recipients of decisions, resentful and reactive to power holders/ duty bearers, ultimately taking to violence and harm towards self and others. It is based on the hypothesis that building coping skills builds resilience in adolescents and building their skills in challenging discrimination and exploitation with duty bearers helps strengthen the latter’s accountability and helps young people learn the value of social activism. The 5 phased programme were in the following sequence:

1. **Group building:** group formation through identification of inter-personal commonalities of experiences, needs, wants, hopes, fears and aspirations. This is the phase which initiates the process of empathy building between members.
2. **Awareness on physical and mental health:** education on bodies, physical and mental health, building group comfort in talking about puberty and sexual health, analysis on the correlation between sex, gender and class and attitudes in self care, shame and guilt (over body). Groups identify common health problems that their communities face and the causes thereof, how they can prevent and access cure services. The group learns common symptoms of psychological disorders and demystify, de-stigmatise ‘madness’. This phase aims to leave the groups with the

realisation how self care is one of the precursors of empowerment and neglect of oneself is symptomatic of low self esteem and discrimination.

3. **Communication skills:** communication with self and others, managing relationships, identifying abuse, building skills in effective communication, empathy, assertion, negotiation and anger management. The participants are taught to recognise abusive relationships and how to deal with them. Anger management and stress management are key elements of the section on working with oneself. Negotiation and confrontations are key elements of interpersonal relationships.
4. **Collective building:** This is the section where the group members experiment on working with each other as a group, for common tasks and common purposes based on common aspirations and dreams. Simulated tasks range may be organising events/ days or celebrating festivals which teach group members how to work in a team, roles and responsibilities division, dependence and co-dependence between group members, trust and boundaries, mitigate and resolve conflicts, leadership styles and skills and group management. This phase aims at breaking normative hierarchies in the group and bullying. Patriarchal definitions of strength and power also get challenged in this phase of the programme.
5. **Becoming social actors, gaining a political voice:** This phase is where the group identifies 'Issues for Change'. These 'changes' that they seek in their contexts challenge violation of their rights, and based on the analysis, they build their plans of action, which involve community work, social actions, campaigning in their communities, advocacy with politicians or bureaucracy as well as the media.

The implementation and M/E design was as follows:

1. 22 Local NGOs and community based organisations from 10 districts across West Bengal, from border (with Bangladesh) adjoining districts formed adolescent 250 girls collectives with memberships of 4,049 adolescents, whom bore socio-demographic profile mentioned above.
2. Sanjog reviewed existent LSE tools and analysed gaps, challenges in implementation. Based on the learnings, it developed the first draft of a manual – using participatory, interactive and experiential exercises.
3. 235 animators (rural, average education ranged from matriculation to graduation), trained with the draft manual –implemented it with their adolescent groups. They observed and recorded effectiveness through common indicators (group dynamics, participation, ability to connect learnings to personal experiences et cetera). Self and peer assessment (between animators), monitoring by project coordinators were used to assess animators' skills and techniques.
4. 40 adolescent peer leaders were trained to build convergence in their local campaign and advocacy initiatives.
5. Based on the learnings from implementation, the programme was modified in content, design and delivery tools. To build sustainability of the programme, of the 235 animators, 8 of them were trained as trainers.

6. Sanjog used ‘MSC (Most Significant Change Stories) as a evaluation technique. 4 of these stories have been developed into graphic novels and used for campaigning, advocacy and peer education.
7. The programme was evaluated by two evaluation organisations – Global Child Protection Services and Dhruva/ Concern for Working Children.

**Outputs and outcomes:**

<b>Change in adolescents</b>	<b>Change in social workers</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Increased information on physical and mental health, sex and gender, social issues of trafficking, migration, child marriage and child rights.</li> <li>(b) Articulation/sharing of feelings (positive and negative) with the group and their families.</li> <li>(c) Resolving/negotiating interpersonal conflicts within the group and the family.</li> <li>(d) Taking informed decisions (analysing pros and cons).</li> <li>(e) Articulating their opinions (in the group/family and community) on social issues of relevance to their lives.</li> <li>(f) Planning strategies for collective action in a group.</li> <li>(g) Taking responsibility and initiative more proactively (for self and others).</li> <li>(h) Facilitating/co-facilitating the life-skills sessions within the group/in the community.</li> <li>(i) Participating in the planning and management of programmes in their groups.</li> <li>(j) Making their collective sustainable through regular attendance and induction of new members.</li> <li>(k) Identifying, planning and implementing a campaign on an issue of local importance within their village/community.</li> <li>(l) Challenging abuse, violence and exploitation in families, communities and by state agencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Increased information and skills in information delivery through participatory methods, improved skills in animation.</li> <li>(b) Better skills in facilitation – and less reliance on teaching.</li> <li>(c) Ability to recognize agency in children, respecting their capacities and looking at them as partners and less as ‘acted upon’.</li> <li>(d) Increased capacity to identify and nurture peer potential among the adolescents worked with.</li> <li>(e) Increased capacity to involve the adolescents worked with in the planning and management of programmes at the CPUs/Crisis Centres/shelter homes/outreach areas in the communities.</li> <li>(f) Increased capacity to facilitate the collectivisation of the adolescent girls on issues for campaign and advocacy.</li> </ul>

## Learnings :

1. Lack of 'concrete benefits' are an initial challenge in outreach and mobilisation.
2. Moving from the 'self' to the 'collective' results in better internalisation and integration of rights with personal values. The reverse results in a super-imposed values without personal conviction.

## Case studies (available in graphic novels)



Ameena, married in her early teens, from a minority community, joined the programme when her parents believed that life skills would help her be a better wife, daughter in law. When her husband wanted to take her with him to Mumbai where he worked as a labourer, the 16 year old protested and was able to negotiate with her family and community to nullify the marriage citing reasons and rationale that they could not ignore.



16 year old Khukuli Khaton, who lived in a village that borders with Bangladesh, was killed by a BSF jawaan at point-blank range. Khukuli's sister, her group members and the organisation continues to campaign for justice.