



## Gender and Adolescence

Welcome to the sixth issue of GenderTalk from the NCAER-National Data Innovation Centre's Gender Hub. In this issue, we focus on the complex realities of adolescence in India— a critical stage of human development when the pressure on young girls and boys to conform to culturally prescribed gender roles intensifies, shaping their experiences and future trajectories.

GenderTalk is a space where scholars, policymakers, and civil society members can engage with each other on a theme vital to women's well-being in India. In this edition, we bring you the following:

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**3. Gender-Unequal Treatment in the Home: Associations with Mental Health among Indian Adolescents**

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### 1. Gender & Adolescence Realities: Identifying Data Gaps & Priorities

*Dibyasree Ganguly, NCAER*

This edition of GenderTalk features a compilation of scholarly research focused on gender and adolescence within the Indian context. Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterised by significant physical, psychological, and social changes. The experiences and challenges faced during adolescence can have profound and lasting effects on an individual's well-being, influencing their mental health, relation-

-ships, and success in adulthood (Lerner et al., 2002). Gender plays a crucial role in shaping these experiences and outcomes. The way boys and girls experience adolescence can vary significantly, affecting their health, social dynamics, and future opportunities.

India possesses one of the largest adolescent populations globally at approximately 21% of the nation's total population

(Census of India, 2011). This cohort is nearly evenly divided between males and females, though some differences exist due to different birth and survival rates. The adolescent male population is approximately 133 million, while the adolescent female population is approximately 120 million (Census of India, 2011).

India has achieved gender parity in educational enrolment, with the enrolment rate of female students equal to or slightly higher than that of male students at every level of education (UDISE Plus, 2022). While dropout rates are equal between girls and boys at the primary level, they tend to increase slightly among girls as they progress through upper primary level (UDISE Plus, 2022). In rural areas, older girls are more likely to drop out to assist family members with household chores (ASER, 2022). This leaves them with less time for school and leisure activities from childhood through adolescence (Vikram et al., 2024).

Figure 1 illustrates that among girls and young women aged 15-29 years, only 14% are engaged in paid work, whereas 54% of men in the same age group participate in paid employment. Conversely, 86% of girls and young women are involved in household chores and 40% in caring for other household members, compared to 24% and 12% of boys and young men, respectively.

**Despite attaining gender parity in education, entrenched gender inequities—perpetuated by the process of gender socialisation, which indoctrinates girls to take on roles as wives and mothers and boys to become providers—continue to impede equitable life opportunities for both sexes.**

**Figure 1: Percentage of men and women aged 15-29 years participating in activities in a day**



Source: Report of the Time Use in India- 2019. Government of India, MoSPI, and NSO, India.

However, no national-level data currently captures information on the gender socialization processes and their implications during adolescence, which significantly shape individuals' futures. A study based on a primary survey provides insights into how parents play an active role as primary influencers in shaping their children's gender beliefs and instilling gender norms (Basu et al., 2017). Another study using sub-nationally representative data shows that this process of gender socialisation imposes additional constraints

on females, limiting their decision-making abilities in daily life, restricting their mobility, and denying them access to financial resources (Ram et al., 2017). Additionally, preferential treatment of males in the household leads to poor mental health for females (Ram et al., 2017). On the other hand, early marriage remains the social norm in India, with approximately 43% of married women aged 15-49 having been married before the age of 18 (IIPS & ICF, 2021). A study conducted in rural areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh suggest that less restrictive gender beliefs among adolescent married girls are linked to greater agency and reduced risk of marital violence (Raj et al., 2021). Promoting gender-equitable attitudes from an early age, both within and outside school, with the support of parents and teachers, and challenging harmful gender norms, can reduce the acceptance of violence (Nanda et al., 2020).

Government initiatives such as Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, targeting the adolescent population, have ambitious and commendable goals. However, impact of any scheme is often limited by implementation challenges, resource allocation issues, and cultural barriers. Addressing these issues requires population-level data to monitor and evaluate outcomes, a multifaceted approach with better resource management, enhanced training, and support for programme implementers, as well as deeper engagement with communities to challenge long-standing gender biases and norms. In the absence of nationally representative data on adolescents, studies based on micro-level data provide insights into the broad spectrum of challenges experienced by adolescents, particularly girls, in India. Comprehensive, nationally representative gender-specific data collection can help identify and prioritise areas necessitating intervention and investment. The articles in this edition explore topics such as gender socialisation and its adverse effects on mental health, the influence of gender beliefs on the agency of adolescent brides, and how promoting gender-equitable attitudes from an early age can mitigate violence in society. In the Conversation section of this issue, we feature the experiences of a public charitable trust, "Doosra Dashak", in promoting holistic education and empowering marginalised adolescent girls through active community engagement in remote rural areas of Rajasthan, India.

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## 2. Learning to Be Gendered: Gender Socialisation in Early Adolescence among the Urban Poor in Delhi, India, and Shanghai, China

Sharmishtha Basu, GIZ India

Adolescence is an important window where gender roles and norms interplay with the onset of puberty and start solidifying (Amin, 2018; Lundgren, 2013). Studies have shown that during early adolescence (10-14 years) both girls and boys are faced with increased expectations to follow unequal gender norms (McCarthy, 2016). Gender norms formed during early adolescence often influence health and sexuality in later adolescence and beyond. Gender inequalities, such as stereotypical gender attitudes, men's authority over women, and unequal access to resources, are associated with negative health outcomes, gender-based violence, and economic vulnerability (Heise et al., 2015; Peacock & Barker, 2014). Gender socialisation, the process of teaching/learning about being a girl or a boy, starts as early as birth and extends throughout adolescence (Hill & Lynch, 1983). It includes teaching girls to be prepared for the roles of wife and mother and training boys to shoulder the roles of provider and protector (Giddens, 2006; ICRW, 2010; Lundgren, 2015).

Appropriate behaviours for males and females are learned and internalised through exposure to different socialising agents such as family, media, and social institutions (Giddens, 2006; Lou et al., 2012). However, children do not passively absorb and embody social messages; they interact with others to produce their own form of gender identity. Gender is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time, and varies widely within and across cultural contexts.

In this paper we specifically tried to understand (1) what gender norms are transmitted to boys and girls and by whom; (2) how these norms are transmitted and whether this process differs by sex; and (3) what differences and similarities in gender socialisation are manifested in urban settings in two Asian countries with diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts. About three-fifths (58%) of early adolescents (10-14 years) reside in China and India. No other studies have compared India and China that have similarities in terms of population and gender disparity in terms of son preference and skewed sex ratio at birth.

Methodology

The study was located in two disadvantaged urban communities in Delhi, India and Shanghai, China and was part of the multi-country (15) Global Early Adolescent Study. Qualitative methodologies were used with boys and girls aged 11–13 years, including 16 group-based timeline exercises and 65 narrative interviews. In addition, 58 parents of participating adolescents were interviewed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated, and uploaded into Atlas.ti for coding and thematic analysis.

Findings

Boys and girls growing up in the same community were directed onto different pathways during their transition from early to late adolescence.

Adolescents and parents in both sites identified mothers as the primary actor, socialising adolescents into how to dress and behave and what gender roles to play, although fathers were also mentioned as influential. Opposite-sex interactions were restricted, and violations enforced by physical violence.

In Delhi, gender roles and mobility were more strictly enforced for girls than boys. Restrictions on opposite-sex interactions were rigid for both boys and girls in Delhi and Shanghai. Sanctions, including beating, for violating norms about boy-girl relationships were more punitive than those related to dress and demeanour, especially in Delhi. Education and career expectations were notably more equitable in Shanghai.

What norms are transmitted? Who transmits them?

Finding	Sites		Adolescents (11-13 years)		Who transmits
What norms are transmitted?	Delhi	Shanghai	Girls	Boys	
“Dressing appropriately”	Yes	No	Yes	No	Mother and father
“Girls should behave like ladies and boys should be brave and tough”	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mother and father
“Girls and boys should not interact”	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mother and father

Gender socialisation Process

Overall, in Delhi and Shanghai, adolescents and their parents identified mothers as the most important actor in the socialisation process, although fathers were mentioned as well—especially in relationship to boys. They also discussed the influence of teachers, as well as siblings, extended families and peers, although in a more limited role than parents. The primary processes of socialisation

referred to were instruction, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. Scolding, punishment such as shaming in front of peers, and beating by parents and teachers were cited by boys and girls in Shanghai.

“I think guidance is still the most important thing. If nobody reminds him, he doesn’t know what is right and what is wrong. So parents should guide them. Also their friends, relatives and teachers should guide them. Then the kids will know. If you didn’t tell the kid that this is wrong, he wouldn’t know it. ...when the teacher praised his friend, he may think that what his friend did was excellent, then he would follow his friends. I guess he would think like this.”  
- Father, 32 years old, with primary school education, has a daughter of 13 years

Adolescents and adults in both settings reported that beating and scolding were often used to enforce norms, especially those related to boy/girl relationships. Physical punishment was more marked in Delhi and more commonly used with boys than girls.

“Mother and Father beat me if I talk too much with girls as I have heard that if a boy talks with a girl in our neighbourhood then the girl’s father lodges a police complaint against the boy.”  
- Boy in Delhi, age 11

From the perspective of teachers and parents, imitation of others, especially peers and media characters who conformed to stereotyped gender identities, was instrumental in the socialisation process. In both settings, but especially in Shanghai, parents expressed concerns that media (romantic soaps) influenced the interaction between boys and girls in Shanghai.

Discussion

This study shows that despite significant modernisation underway in both India and China, entrenched gender inequities flowing from dominant patriarchal structures persist, with potential long-term negative outcomes for adolescents. The results illustrate the interplay between the efforts of parents (Kågesten et al., 2016) to inculcate traditional values and norms, such as those related to purity and modesty, and the influence of structural transformations bringing expanded economic roles for women. Increased understanding of this dynamic process provides insight into opportunities to increase gender equality. Children learn about gender by watching and imitating those around them and through explicit instruction, discipline, and sanctions (Vikram et al., 2024). Thus, it is important to work with parents and communities, as well as with the children themselves, to foster critical reflection of the negative consequences of gender inequity and offer alternative ways of performing masculine and feminine roles. Efforts to bring about more equitable gender norms would lay a foundation for improved health and well-being over the life course (McCarthy et al., 2016). Such programs have been limited



in number, scale and impact. Information from longitudinal studies on gender socialisation across different cultural settings would inform the design of gender transformative programming.

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Photo Source: Canva





### 3. Gender-Unequal Treatment in the Home: Associations with Mental Health among Indian Adolescents

Lisa Strohschein, University of Alberta

Adolescence is a stage in the life course when one begins to imagine and then prepare for adulthood. Although adolescents continue to rely on their parents for guidance and support, they begin to achieve greater independence, with widened opportunities to explore the world around them.

At the same time, the journey through adolescence is gendered. It is common for girls and boys to be treated as essentially different, with girls viewed as innately nurturing and boys as naturally competitive. These beliefs tend to produce their intended result, steering girls towards motherhood and domesticity and boys towards the world of paid work. To the extent that boys are seen as more valuable than girls, diverting resources such as education and health care away from girls and towards boys comes to be seen as desirable and even normative (Dube, 1988).

#### What is gender socialization?

Gender socialization is a culturally-specific process that teaches people to behave in accordance with their assigned gender.

It is in the family setting that children first become aware of their own gender, start to appreciate the different expectations for behaviour placed on boys and girls, and ultimately internalise a gender identity (Endendijk et al., 2018). Parents function as active socialisation agents, differentially shaping how boys and girls approach education, mobility, leisure activities, domestic responsibilities, and more (Dittman et al., 2023). For example, researchers in India find adolescent girls are given few opportunities to venture outside the home, even as boys are largely free to involve themselves in community activities (Basu et al., 2017; Vikram et al., 2024). Parents also model behaviours that reinforce gender roles. Children observe that domestic chores are performed by mothers and that their fathers are decision-makers in the household. Consequently, girls in India learn that their proper place is in the home, fulfilling domestic duties and attending to the needs of men, whereas boys come to believe that men are superior to women and must exercise authority over them.

What is the situation for adolescents in India, a country characterised by high levels of gender inequality? Specifically, to what extent do families treat adolescents differently on the basis of their sex? Are adolescent girls more likely than adolescent boys to be aware of gender unequal treatment in the home? Finally, to what extent are gender unequal experiences in the family differentially associated with the mental health of male and female adolescents?

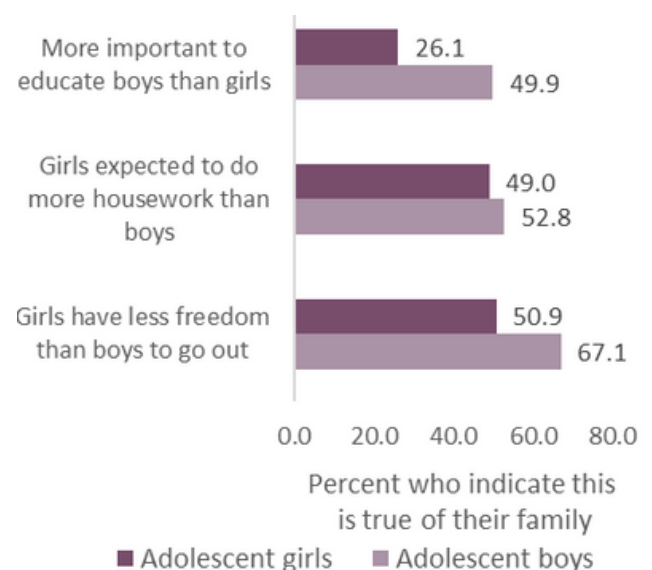
The Youth in India: Situation and Needs Study, conducted in six Indian states between 2006 and 2008, sheds some light on these questions. The current analysis is restricted to 13,484 unmarried adolescents (ages 15 to 17).

The survey asked respondents three questions about their perceived treatment as a boy or girl in the household. Girls were

asked “Was your education given less importance compared to your brothers?”, “Were you given much less freedom to roam around or go out compared to your brothers?” and “Were you expected to do a lot more housework compared to your brothers?”. The questions were phrased the other way for male adolescents (e.g., “Was your education given more importance compared to your sisters?”). Respondents who did not have siblings of the other sex were asked to compare to cousins. For both sexes, responses indicating privileged treatment of boys were coded 1 and 0 otherwise. Items were analysed separately, but also summed to produce a scale ranging from 0 to 3, with higher values representing greater preferential treatment of boys. Poor mental health was assessed with the GHQ-12, a twelve-item checklist used to screen for mental health problems in the general population. Items included whether, in the past month, respondents experienced emotions such as feeling worthless, unable to concentrate, feeling constantly under strain, and unable to enjoy normal activities. Items were coded 1 if respondents had experienced a negative emotion and 0 otherwise, then summed to produce a count of negative emotions ranging from 0 to 12. Respondents who reported three or more negative emotions in the past month were coded as having poor mental health.

Figure 1 confirms that the preferential treatment of boys in families is common.

**Figure 1. Gender socialisation experiences, unmarried adolescent boys and girls aged 15-17, Youth in India: Situation and Needs Study (n=13,484)**



For every indicator, however, adolescent boys were more likely than were adolescent girls to identify gender unequal treatment in their home. The gender gap was greatest for those who said their families treated education as more important for boys than girls, with half as many girls as boys

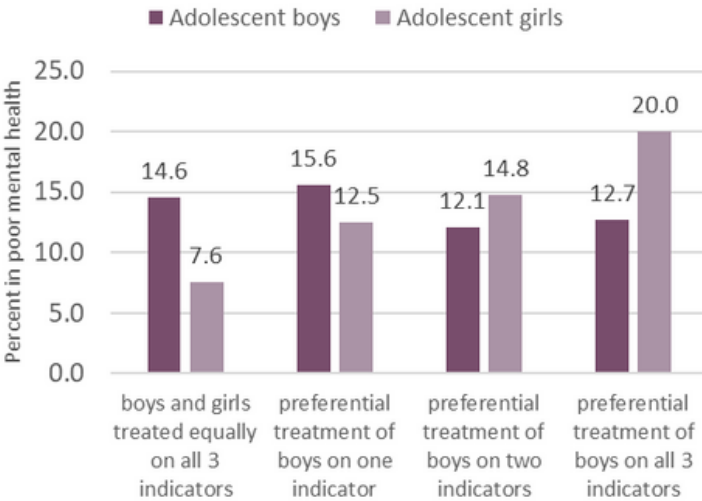


indicating this was true for their families (26.1% versus 49.9%). Interestingly, the association between gender unequal treatment and poor mental health operated differently for adolescent girls than it did for adolescent boys (Figure 2).

**Adolescent girls reported correspondingly worse mental health as the preferential treatment of boys in their families increased. In contrast, adolescent boys' perceptions of gender unequal treatment were unrelated to their mental health.**

The resulting pattern was that when families treated males and females equally, nearly half as many adolescent girls as adolescent boys reported poor mental health (7.6% versus 14.6%). When boys were treated better than girls across all three indicators, mental health trended in the other direction, with more adolescent girls than boys in poor mental health (20.0% versus 12.7%).

**Figure 2. Prevalence of poor mental health by level of gender unequal treatment in household, unmarried adolescent boys and girls aged 15-17, Youth in India: Situation and Needs Study (n=13,484).**



These results, also discussed in Ram et al. (2014), provide a small window into the gender socialisation of Indian adolescents. Yet, there is much more to do. Today, these respondents are in their thirties and most, if not all, are

themselves parents. As their children enter adolescence, will they also perceive gender unequal treatment in their families? Will the people that they ultimately become depend on their talents and aspirations, or, as historically been the case in India, what is deemed appropriate for their gender?

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## 4. Understanding Gender Normative Beliefs and Girls' Agency in India: What we know and Why it matters

Anita Raj, Tulane University

Adolescence, that period from approximately age 10 to 24 years of age, is a time of enormous change in young people's brain development and cognition, family and social relationships, and social roles and expectations (Sawyer et al., 2018). It is during this period that youth in most cultures move away from authority figures, such as parents, teachers, or religious leaders, and toward peers as their primary influencers. This is also the period in which they increase their independence and agency (Bandura, 2006), but too often, girls are given less opportunity than boys to be agentic and independent.

Agency, which we can define as the capacity to act with self-regulation and self-determination to achieve one's goals, supports adolescent development and transition into responsible and healthy adulthood (Bandura, 2006). It can also help adolescents maintain stability and resilience in the face of change, increasing the likelihood of their retention in school, economic opportunity in adulthood, and healthy sexual relationships (Sawyer et al., 2018; Taukobong et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2019). For this reason, agency is a goal of global adolescent programming, especially for adolescent girls, but there remains a paucity of data on how programmes improve girls' agency, such as their decision-making, freedom of movement, social and digital connectivity, and self-efficacy or belief in their capacities to make change in their lives.

Historically, girls' education was viewed as the primary mechanism to strengthen girls' agency and empowerment, and to support their capabilities to achieve self-determination (Murphy & Lloyd, 2016). However, growing evidence suggests that social norms may be an even more important target for programmes designed to increase girls' agency (Harper & Marcus, 2018).

**Restrictive gender social norms - i.e., the contextually and culturally-entrenched expectations of what girls can or cannot do - can constrain girls' agency by impeding their freedom of movement, social relationships, and access to information, typically with the goal of increasing her sexual honour, marriageability, and likelihood of childbearing and motherhood.**

This is often rooted in a socially limited value of women and girls, defining their achievement only in the forms of being a wife and mother (Harper & Marcus, 2018), and the norms that reinforce these values begin to intensify in early adolescence and peak by late adolescence and young adulthood (Dandona et al., 2024).

India is an important context in which to consider these issues, given that one in five residents of India – almost 270 million people - are adolescents. Further, the Government of India's Adolescent Health Strategy (IAHS) prioritises issues of gender equity and adolescents' agency in their achievement of health, well-being, and their full

potential, though there is limited guidance on how to address gender inequities in ways that improve girls' agency (Dandona et al., 2024). The importance of addressing gender equity cannot be overstated, as restrictive gender attitudes persist strongly in the country (Pew, 2022). A recent survey conducted in India found that 87% of Indian adults believe a woman should always obey her husband, and 80% said that a man should be prioritised over a woman for a job when job access is low (Pew, 2022). Further, sex ratio imbalances disadvantaging girls, and indicative of the lower value of girls, persist, and at a notable level compared with other nations (Tafuro & Guilamoto, 2020).

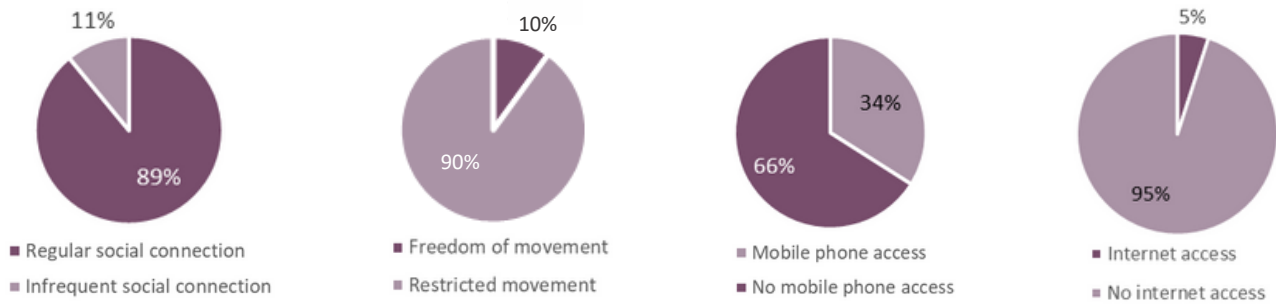
To provide further insight into the role of restrictive gender role attitudes and norms on the development of girls' agency, our team analysed data from a cross-sectional survey conducted with married adolescent girls in rural Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 2015 and 2016 (n=4893 15-19 year olds) (Raj et al., 2021). We examined whether traditional gender role beliefs were associated with indicators of girls' agency. Measures on gender role beliefs included beliefs regarding appropriateness of: a) women/girls' choice in timing for marriage, b) married women's engagement in household economic decision-making, c) male responsibility for child needs, and d) men's intimate partner violence against wives. Our outcome variables were freedom of movement (mobility), time with friends (social connection), and mobile phone ownership and internet access (digital connection). Findings indicate variation in effects across predictor variables.

We found that our most robust predictor of agency outcomes was holding beliefs supportive of female marital choice; this variable was associated with freedom of movement, social connection, and digital connection (Figure 1). This finding is quite striking given that parents selected the husband in 93% of cases, and 52% of girls were not asked their opinion about this mate. Additional robust predictors were beliefs that men should be responsible to meet child needs (e.g., bathing) and beliefs that women should have economic decision-making control in households, both of which were associated with freedom of movement and digital connection. Overall, these findings suggest that gender transformative norms that support women's decision-making control and men's childcare responsibilities may increase women's agency broadly in rural India, even for very young wives.

Other analyses using data with youth in India from this same study yield similar or complementary findings. Analysis of unmarried girls found that those with less traditional gender roles, using the same indicators described above, were more likely to hold career aspirations (Patel et al., 2021).



# Married Girls' Agency in Connection and Mobility: Findings from Rural India



## Beliefs associated with Agency for Married Girls

*Beliefs on acceptability of women's engagement in selection of husband is associated with:*

- Social Connection
- Freedom of Movement
- Mobile phone ownership

*Beliefs on acceptability of men's engagement in childcare responsibilities is associated with:*

- Freedom of Movement
- Internet Access

*Beliefs on acceptability of women's economic decision making is associated with:*

- Social Connection
- Freedom of Movement

See: Raj A, Johns NE, Bhan N, Silverman JG, Lundgren R. Effects of gender role beliefs on social connectivity and marital safety: findings from a cross sectional study among married adolescent girls in India. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2023 Dec 1:69(6);S65-73

Unfortunately, we did see that girls held more gender egalitarian views than did boys, which may compromise equality in heterosexual marriages in this context. A subset of married women recruited as married girls in a prior cohort of this study, collected in 1991, as well as currently married youth aged 15-21 in Jharkhand, additionally showed that those reporting that they rather than their family selected their mate were more likely to hold more gender egalitarian beliefs, and were more likely to report agency as indicated by freedom of movement, economic decision-making, and marital communication and contraceptive use (Jejeebhoy et al., 2022).

In sum, adolescence is an important time of transition and development, physically and emotionally, but restrictive gender norms and beliefs can potentially impede this development by hindering youths' choices and capacities to act on these choices. This is especially true for girls, for whom value can be restricted to their potential roles as wife and mother, and corresponding family and community norms and resultant beliefs held by girls regarding these expectations can impede girls' agency in decision-making, movement, and socialisation. We examined this issue using survey data from rural adolescents in two states in India and found that less restrictive gender beliefs overall are associated with greater agency for girls and reduce their risk for marital violence. Two gender beliefs in particular showed greater effects across our agency outcomes- the acceptability of girls'/women's decision-making on the timing of marriage and the acceptability of fathers' involvement in childcare. These findings reinforce the importance of supporting women's decision-making related to marriage and male responsibility for domestic labour to support women and girls' agency and safety broadly in India.

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## 5. Equitable Gender Attitudes and Norms must be Promoted during Adolescence

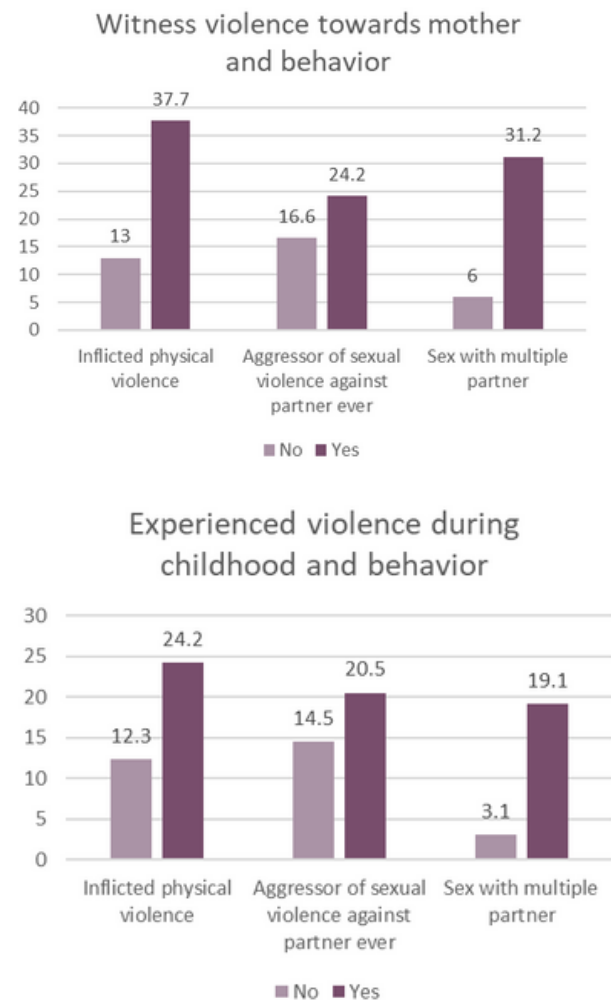
Ravi Verma, ICRW

The NFHS-2019-21 data shows that one in five men support violence against intimate partners, and 80 per cent of Indian men believe that a man should have the final say at home (IIPS & ICF, 2021). This viewpoint of male supremacy, very often even supported by women, sees gender equality as a zero-sum game that creates challenges, especially when involving men in gender equality efforts (Verma, 2018). Men may feel that gender equality initiatives mean relinquishing power to women and may not fully realise the adverse impact of hegemonic masculinity on them. Studies on men and violence worldwide show that one in three men who perpetrated violence against their wives/partners also felt that women's rights come at the expense of men. Two-thirds of them said that women's empowerment policies are too harsh for men (ICRW & PROMUNDO, 2010).

How and where do men acquire these ideas? In recent decades, there has been a substantial increase in research and programmes targeting adolescents from 10-14 years (Mmari, 2023) and 15-19 years (Mmari et al., 2024). These studies have shown that adolescents as young as ten years old already have formed perceptions about gender norms that have a lasting impact on their health and behaviours (Koenig, 2021). Adolescent boys are made to actualise their eventual role of provider and protector through rites of passage (Verma & Mahendra, 2004). Studies on men and masculinities, on the other hand, have also increased rapidly in the last decade, showing that men who experienced and/or witnessed violence within their families – father beating mother or being violent - are more likely to become violent men and justify inequitable attitudes and behaviours and engage in multiple sexual partner behaviour than those who did not experience or witness violence within the family (Figure 1) (Barker et al., 2011). The link between experiencing and witnessing violence during childhood and later perpetrating violence in adulthood is well-documented (Contreras et al., 2011).

The relationship between masculinity and violence against women and girls and gender variant groups is complicated by men's vulnerability and their inability to exert 'male dominance and power' or fulfil the expected male role of being a provider. International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) data also showed that men who felt economically disempowered due to unemployment or underemployment were more likely to perpetrate violence against intimate partners (Barker et al., 2011). The concept of male privilege and dominance within a patriarchal

**Figure 1. Relationship between witnessing and/or experiencing violence during childhood and perpetration of violence against partner during adulthood sex with multiple sexual partners (IMAGES data, 2011)**



framework necessitates that men and growing boys conform to an archetype characterised by toughness, muscularity, emotional repression, resolution of conflicts through interpersonal violence, exertion of control over women and girls, and participation in risk-taking behaviour.

During the crucial stage of adolescence, boys and girls begin to shape their gender identities under the watchful eyes of patriarchal gender norms as practised within families and institutions like schools. By involving adolescents in conversations and initiatives that challenge conventional gender roles, we can help them develop a nuanced understanding of gender and its societal impact (Achyut et al., 2016). This, in turn, can contribute to dismantling harmful stereotypes and biases, fostering a more just and equal world for all.

Moreover, working with adolescents on gender norms is crucial for promoting mental and emotional well-being.

Many adolescents grapple with conforming to societal gender expectations, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (Verma & Khurana, 2023). By creating spaces for open dialogue and education around gender norms, we can support adolescents in developing a positive and affirming sense of self, irrespective of their alignment with traditional gender expectations. Furthermore, addressing gender norms during adolescence is essential for fostering healthy and respectful relationships.

**Traditional gender norms often perpetuate power imbalances and unhealthy dynamics within relationships. By providing adolescents with the tools to critically analyse and deconstruct these norms, we can enable them to transform how they relate to others.**

They must establish relationships based on mutual respect, consent, and equality, ultimately contributing to the prevention of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Additionally, addressing gender norms during adolescence and especially impacting institutions where inequitable gender norms are practised is crucial for preparing young people to navigate the complexities of the modern world (Nanda et al., 2020). As societal understandings of gender evolve, adolescents need the skills and knowledge to engage with these changes thoughtfully and respectfully. By encouraging critical thinking and reflection on gender norms, we can equip adolescents to become active and empathetic participants in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society.

What is important to understand is that the need to transform gender norms is neither exclusively a women's issue nor a men's issue, but is a society-wide issue. It is as much about women's empowerment and reclaiming safe space as it is about deconstructing masculinity and dismantling privilege; it is also about support and intervention for women as it is about education, awareness, and prevention of harm for men. Boys and men must be addressed as part of the solution, not just part of the problem. They need to be engaged with and challenged to critically reflect on the existence of patriarchy, male power and privilege; to analyse the costs to women and girls, but also the costs to men and boys and others who don't conform to the traditional binary gender norms. Finally, men and boys must also be shown the benefits of gender equality. The ideas of male supremacy and entitlement must be challenged early and in a sustained manner. They must know that gender equality is a public good, not a zero-sum game.

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## 6. Conversation with Abhimanyu Singh, Shobhita Rajagopal, and Mukta Gupta

### *Doosra Dashak*

**D**oosra Dashak was initiated in Rajasthan in 2001 by Foundation for Education and Development [1] (FED) to empower adolescents in the age group of 11-20 years. Doosra Dashak (DD) means ‘second decade’. The focus was on giving a ‘second chance’ and developing a sense of self-worth among out-of-school adolescents and providing them with skills for life. In this section, representatives from Doosra Dashak joins us to discuss about some of the interventions that Doosra Dashak engaged in to empower adolescent boys and girls in Rajasthan.

*Please see this [link](#) for a detailed report of Doosra Dashak's ‘Full Journey’ of its various interventions.*

### **Q1. Why does Doosra Dashak focus on adolescent boys and girls? What are the urgent policy gaps?**

The need for an intervention like Doosra Dashak was based on the premise that adolescents can play the role of catalysts in a process of social transformation. The proposed vision was ‘creation of a new social order through community participation, based on values of equity and justice; providing a second chance for education to the unschooled adolescents and the preparation of a cadre of committed adolescents and young persons equipped with relevant education and skills’. Today, the project is operational in nine blocks in seven districts of the state, covering 238 Panchayats and 1,143 revenue villages (MIS data of FED).

By early 2000, research evidence clearly indicated that enrolment in primary grades I-V had increased steadily since the National Policy of Education (NPE) 1986. On the other hand, it was also evident that there were no central or state government schemes or interventions to address the specific challenges posed by the large proportion of adolescents who were out of school and had no alternative pathways for learning. Despite their dynamism and idealism, they were adrift, vulnerable and at risk. FED felt that there was a need to channelise the potential and talent of marginalised adolescents for constructive purposes by providing them avenues for self-development and a sense of purpose. It took a decision to launch the Doosra Dashak project for the 11-20 age group in 2001.

Doosra Dashak began by addressing the needs of adolescent boys and girls who had been left out of the policy discourse. It has enabled a large number of adolescents to explore new knowledge and charter uninitiated pathways. This has enabled adolescents to communicate with confidence and provide information to

the community on a range of issues. They have been able to raise their voice against practices of early marriage and discriminatory practices. Their employment opportunities have improved and their income has increased. Several adolescents who have benefitted from the DD camps are now engaged in government programmes such as Asha Sahyogini, Aanganwadi Worker, MGNREGA Mate, Maabadi Shiksha Sahyogi, Police Van Rakshak, Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), Sathin and Forest Guards. Other have jobs in banks and as teachers. They have also contested for the post of Sarpanch and Ward Panch, and have become members of the Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti.

### **Q2. What is an Ikhvelo, and how has it supported the attainment of learning outcomes among adolescents from marginalised communities?**

Ikhvelos are continuing education centres set up by Doosra Dashak at the panchayat level to facilitate continuing education and promote reading and learning among adolescents and youth. Over the years, Ikhvelos have emerged as multipurpose centres for the community and adolescents and offer opportunities for peer learning in a conducive environment. With the provision of digital devices (laptops, tablets and smart phones) and the presence of at least one woman supervisor, Ikhvelos attract disadvantaged children and adolescents, especially adolescent girls. DD block teams spread awareness about open schooling, help out-of-school adolescents submit the required forms, and encourage parents to help their children complete their education. Academic guidance is provided to aspirants through the Ikhvelos where they get help to prepare for their exams. In 2022-23, 553 adolescents (107 boys and 446 girls) completed Grade 10 and 12 through Open Schooling (DD Annual Report, 2023).

*“I belong to a dalit family and was brought up in a conservative milieu. I always wanted to study but I got married when I was in Class 8. I was barely 13 years old. Marriage disrupted my life and dreams. Post marriage, my mobility was restricted both inside and outside the home. Soon after I gave birth to two girls. DD started an Ikhvelo in our village. I never in my dreams thought that I will get a second chance to study again! After much persuasion and negotiation with my parents-in-law, at the age of 21, I joined the 4-month residential camp organised by Doosra Dashak. I have now passed my Class 10 through open schooling and I am preparing for my Class 12 exam. I have gained confidence and have become a role model for girls and young women in the village. I want my daughters to be able to complete their education before marriage. I strongly believe that early marriage is a major barrier to women’s education and emancipation”. -Female participant in residential camp, Bap*

*My association with DD started when I was just 12 years old and was a regular visitor to the Ikhvelo. I was selected by the DD team to participate in a workshop organised by the Azim Premji Philanthropy Initiative [APPI, a funded project for*

*'Empowering marginalised young girls and women as youth leaders'] at Bhopal when I was in Class 12. I came in contact with the staff of APPI who encouraged me to apply to university. I am now pursuing my Bachelor's degree. My life has changed! - Female participant, Pisangan*

### **Q3. How has the Gender Equity Movement in Schools for Boys (GEMS) influenced boys' perspectives and thinking?**

DD's recent involvement in the Gender Equity Movement in Schools for Boys (GEMS) has brought about significant changes in the perspective of boys. It has provided an opportunity for discussing issues of justice and gender equity. DD encourages boys to actively advocate for impartiality both at home and in their communities. Through dialogue and collaborative activities, boys have started to understand the principles of equity and equality in their daily lives e.g. by equal participation in household chores with their mother and sisters. The GEMS project not only influenced boys' perspective but also changed the thinking of involved teachers, which is given below in one's own words -

"Before, I used to engage in fights at school, call boys by derogatory names, and tease them. But since I understood the GEMS sessions, I've changed a lot. Now, I avoid arguments, call boys by their full names, and don't use abusive names. I've also learned deeply about violence and have applied it in my life" – (Shambhudayal Jaiman Teacher, Government Secondary School, Khakharwada, Pindwara)

### **Q4. What types of training do you provide to develop leadership skills among adolescents? Why is it important to focus on life skills education?**

Short-duration training/camps on specific themes like life skills education (LSE) have been organised. 58,734 adolescents have benefitted through DD's LSE package, which seeks to equip adolescents with reflective, social, and negotiating skills to navigate challenges related to their self-development and nurture their potential to work as agents of social change. In addition, leadership skills are inculcated among youth through discussions on social issues such as caste discrimination, gender equity, and economic disparities. These discussions help them understand and address real-world problems, fostering critical thinking and leadership skills.

*"I have decided that after completing post-graduation, I will prepare for B.Ed. I want to become a government teacher so that I can help those girls who have faced challenges like me." - Female beneficiary, Kishanganj*

Kanta is a resident of a village situated in the Aravalli valley, bordering Rajasthan and Gujarat. There was a single primary school in the village with high teacher absenteeism. Kanta changed her school which was 50 kilometres from her village. However the teachers were not friendly and used corporal punishment to discipline the students.

In 2003 Doosra Dashak started its work in Abu Road block. The DD team met Kanta's parents and after a lot of cajoling and discussions Kanta agreed to join the camp. Kanta liked the atmosphere of the camp and the behaviour of the camp teachers. She was motivated to study in all seriousness. After the camp she enrolled in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) and completed Grade 8. She was also active at the community level through Yuva Manch. She realised the importance of education and completed her B.A. and B.Ed. She was keen to serve the nation after meeting former President Shri A.P.J. Kalam with Anil Bordia in 2008.

She appeared for the competitive exams to join the police department. After the physical training and exam, she was selected in the police force in April 2017. Known as "belt no. 813" Kanta has become a role model for her village and neighbouring areas.

### **Q5. Why is it important to work at the community level? Could you elaborate on how this impact manifests?**

Doosra Dashak believes that to bring about social change on a large scale, community participation and ownership is necessary. It increases the prospects of sustainability of the project. DD invests in nurturing and capacity building of community-based organisations in the form of Yuva Manch and Mahila Samooch in its project villages to implement its programmes, sustain, and deepen their impact. DD's youth groups at the village level and Yuva Sakti Sangathan at the block level in project areas are well positioned to assist and guide Sahbhagis (DD beneficiaries) who graduate from its residential camps and short-duration life-skills training. The Mahila Samoochs (women's groups constituted at the village level) and Jagrit Mahila Sangathans (groups constituted at the block level) contribute and work towards improved reproductive health, nutrition, and safe motherhood, and improving the livelihoods and empowerment of rural women.

### **Q6. How has educational interventions by Doosra Dashak transformed the lives of adolescent boys and girls?**

All the above experiences show that the project enabled a change in attitudes regarding the need for education, especially that of girls. The fact that a large number of girls have participated in the residential trainings with parental support and consent has been a significant step. Parents and community members observed the changes that came about in the boys and girls who attended the camps and encouraged the adolescents to study further (Rajagopal, 2019). In a social context where inequality prevails and poverty, geographic distance, and isolation based on class, caste, gender and religion continue, Doosra Dashak has tried to mitigate the marginalisation of young adolescents and empower them through 'knowledge and information'.



*"I joined the 4-month residential camp in 2007 and later got admission in a government school in grade 7. There were only two girls and the rest were boys. The other girl was absent most of the time. I hated going to school because the boys used to tease me. Doosra Dashak officials helped me get admission in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), even though it meant going back to Grade 6. After completing my course in KGBV, I took admission in Grade 9 in the government school. When I was in Grade 12, my father passed away; soon after my mother also passed away. I was informed that there was a scholarship I could apply for to pursue higher education. I joined an undergraduate course. I did not tell anyone at home about the scholarship, because it would have been used for household expenses. I worked at the Ikhvelo along with my studies and completed my B.A. Since 2021, I have been working with Educate Girls as a Field Coordinator". -Female participant residential camp, Pindwara)*

*"I participated in the short-term LSE camp organised by DD. I was an active member of Yuva Manch and participated in all the activities while continuing my education. I am now employed in the Indian Railways. In the camps/ training we learnt about the ill effects of dowry and when I married, my family did not demand any dowry. I owe my success to my association with DD". - Male participant of LSE training, Bassi*

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[1] The Foundation for Education & Development (FED) was registered as a non-profit trust in 2001 by Anil Bordia, the eminent educationist and social activist. He also played a central role in designing innovative programmes like Shiksha Karmi and Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan.

Foundation for Education and Development (2023). Annual Report, 2022-23. Doosra Dashak, Jaipur.  
Authors: Abhimanyu Singh, Shobhita Rajagopal, and Mukta Gupta

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**Shobhita Rajagopal** is a gender academic and former Professor, Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur. As a feminist researcher she has been actively engaged on issues related to women's rights and empowerment in Rajasthan and India. She has several publications to her credit in both national and international journals and books. A recent co-authored publication is *Open and Distance Learning in Secondary School Education in India, Potential and Limitations*, Routledge, 2019.

**Mukta Gupta** has been a teacher educator in India as well as in Southeast Asia for over 20 years. For the past 10 years, she has been working on issues related to gender and education as a freelance researcher. Her focus has been on life skills education with marginalised communities in India, especially in Rajasthan. She has worked closely with UNICEF in developing Adhyapika Manch and Meena Manch modules for the Government of Rajasthan. She has been actively engaged with organisations such as Doosra Dashak, Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur and Sandhan, on projects related to girls' health and education.





## Reads from around the Web

Aggarwal, S., Francis, K. L., Dashti, S. G., & Patton, G. (2023). *Child marriage and the mental health of adolescent girls: a longitudinal cohort study from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, India*. The Lancet Regional Health-Southeast Asia, 8. [Link](#)

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Our website can be found at <https://ndic.ncaer.org/research-theme/gender-data-hub/>.