Why Social Connectivity Matters for Adolescent Girls
Where, after all, do universal human rights begin?

In small places, close to home—so close and so small they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.

— Eleanor Roosevelt
While the world often expands for boys at adolescence, giving them greater autonomy, mobility, opportunity and power, for girls it contracts as they are systematically deprived of these advantages by key stakeholders - families, peers and community leaders.

Adolescent girls from vulnerable communities in India fall squarely in the middle of several spheres of disadvantage, such as youth, gender and poverty. Girls go without adequate healthcare, nutrition and education, trapping them in intergenerational poverty. They are deprived of basic human rights and are exposed to violence and discrimination. This makes them the most disconnected people in India.

While discrimination can start even in the womb with sex-selective abortion, it is at puberty that the course of a girl’s life diverges dramatically from a boy’s. Pregnancy,辍学, marriage and premature childbirth can trap girls and their families in intergenerational poverty. But if she’s given the opportunity, she could break that cycle.

Partly, that’s due to the nature of adolescence. Adolescence presents a unique window of opportunity in girls’ lives. Dasra’s research shows that connecting an adolescent girl across circles of influence – family, friends and the community at large – and giving her access to her rights and resources can transform India and the world.

The Disconnected Adolescent Girl

She’s now seen as being a woman and could be pulled out of school, married at 14 and pregnant at 15, trapping her and her family in intergenerational poverty. But if she’s given the opportunity to break that cycle, she could transform India and the world.

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Who are the Disconnected Girls in India?

Girls affected by social practices such as child marriage, early pregnancy and domestic violence.

Girls belonging to socially isolated and vulnerable communities such as tribal and dalit populations, those living in remote areas or urban slums, female migrants.

Girls living in insecure areas which are vulnerable to natural disaster, armed conflict or gender based violence.

Girls without protection living on the streets, in violent homes, or victims of trafficking.

Girls denied access to quality education due to poverty, lack of safety and security, disability, and religious conventions or traditional practices.
Relationships are critically important in the lives of young girls, not just because of the value that all human beings place on human contact, crucial as that is, but also because it is instrumental in providing individuals with access to goods, services, information and legal protections that allow for a productive life.

Those interested in maximizing society’s welfare should shift their attention from an emphasis on increasing consumption opportunities to an emphasis on increasing social contacts.
Meera is an adolescent girl in a remote village in the East of India. She is also pregnant, but unaware that several girls in her neighborhood had availed of a government program that allowed them to deliver safely in a government hospital. If Meera had a network of friends, she would have had their support and shared in their knowledge. Instead, she may deliver her baby at home, exposed to a variety of maternal mortality risks.

Awareness level of the rural pregnant mothers regarding the entitlements of Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakaram (JSSK) is low in rural West Bengal. There is minimal awareness of entitlements namely free caesarean section, free provision of blood transfusions for mothers & sick infants.

Social connectivity means, in essence, the development of strong, positive and equal human relationships (including via social networks, guidance and support) which provide an individual with the rights and resources necessary to achieve his or her full potential.

It can multiply the return on social investments by acting as a bridge between isolated girls and the infrastructure available thanks to community efforts, the government, social entrepreneurs and others.

Relationships, resources and rights are all crucial, but for adolescent girls, relationships additionally hold the key to the latter two dimensions of social connectivity. For example: Research suggests that social support from friends and family provides an anchor that empowers victims of domestic violence to negotiate her situation and access her rights.

Having a social network immediately provides young girls with access to more information about health, hygiene, nutrition and other important data that could transform their lives. Studies have established that young girls are more likely to learn about and adopt new menstrual hygiene practices if their peers engage in the same practice.
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"If it is a great mistake, then the husband is justified in beating his wife. Why not? A cow will not be obedient without beatings."
- Woman interviewed in Tamil Nadu, India (a)

"She was a girl! She would have had to die tomorrow anyway, instead she died today."
- a grandmother, after strangling her new born grandchild in Haryana, India (b)

"Why do girls need a cell phone? Internet is a waste of time and money. Girls should better utilize their time for study and other works."
- Village Head, Suraj, Gujarat, 2016

"If all mobile internet users in India are female.

35% of crimes against girls & women are reported every hour.

26 married adolescents are thrice as likely to report being subjected to forced sex.

57% of Indian boys think wife beating is acceptable.

CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE
Girls are discriminated against in myriad ways. As discussed earlier, this is partly due to long-accepted social norms in India. Within a family, decision-making powers are typically centered with the male members of the family. Therefore, a girl’s father and brothers play a crucial role in deciding the use of her time, her social status, mobility, access to education and healthcare and act as her ‘gatekeepers.’

A girl’s family is conditioned to believe that girls are of less value than boys, and this is complicated by the social pressure on a bride’s family to pay dowry when a daughter is married. Accordingly, they are less inclined to spend on a girl’s health, education or even her nutrition. In poor families, a father prefers to use limited resources for his son’s education over his daughter’s as the boy represents the future of the household.

Parents often tell girls, “Why do you need to study? We have to marry you off, and you should have kids and stay at home. You don’t have any use for studies.”

CONNECTING WITH HER FAMILY

Girls are seen as ‘women in training’ and are required to manage the burden of household chores such as cooking and caring for relatives and younger siblings. Public spaces are deemed unsafe once they reach puberty. Often, girls are forced to stay within the home, and their mobility is monitored and restricted. Parents also feel pressured to marry a girl child off soon after the onset of puberty because they believe that her marriage will protect her honor, and reduce her vulnerability.

Marriage changes the known and safe parameters of a young girl’s life. She is moved from familiar surroundings; loses contact with friends, has to initiate sexual activity with someone she barely knows and soon becomes a mother. This increases her sense of isolation and disconnection, and affects her potential to live a healthy and productive life.

Approximately 1 out of 100 girls in India make it to class 12.

At 40%, India accounts for the world’s largest share of child marriages globally.
46% of Indian adolescent girls surveyed were not involved in decision-making related to their health care, major family purchases, buying daily household needs, and visiting family and friends.

For every 100 girls that enroll in school in rural India, 40 will reach grade 4, 18 will reach grade eight, nine will reach grade 9, and only one will make it to grade 12.

71% of married adolescents do not have the right to move freely without seeking the permission of their husbands or families.
Creating the Right Connections At Home

Since gatekeepers have the authority in a girl’s life to decide whether she gets an education, whether she is forced into early marriage and pregnancy it is necessary to ‘equalize’ this relationship. Investing in interventions that focus on achieving the set objectives set out below could help create social connectivity for an adolescent girl within her home:

Empowering the girl to negotiate with her family for her rights. By empowering a girl to speak up and building her decision making powers, interventions can help young girls see themselves and others as equal members in relationships and as individuals capable of participating in society. This can have far-reaching effects and make her capable in many ways of protecting herself and navigating her life.

Engaging with her gatekeepers. A girl’s father and brothers, older women in the family, are decision makers on matters related to the present and future of an adolescent girl such as schooling, marriage and mobility. Building a dialogue with them on harmful cultural practices (such as child marriage) and changing their behaviors is a crucial step towards ensuring that adolescent girls live better lives.

Building a girl’s sense of agency is reported to create a 50% increase in independent decision making, and a 60% positive change in their sense of self-efficacy.

A delay of even a year in the age of a girl’s marriage increases the chances of her becoming literate by 5.6%.

Radha studies in grade 9, in Varanasi. Her father is a rickshaw puller and her mother is a housewife. She had only joined S4D (a sports program in her neighborhood) because her friend, Manisha had convinced her to join it. After three months there though, she had begun to love it. It made her feel like she belonged.

She had made some new friends, and they played sports together and had all kinds of interesting discussions about her rights, body and sexuality. She never felt self-conscious at S4D. She could ask questions whenever she felt like it, and most importantly, she could be herself.

In time, she started to exercise some of the rights she learnt about at S4D in other spaces she occupied—most importantly, her home. She learnt to negotiate with her parents for the little things that made her life simpler. What made her really happy was when, after a month of negotiating with her father, her parents finally allowed her to use her brother’s bicycle to go to school and sometimes to even visit friends. After a few months, she finally convinced her parents to let her have the bicycle for herself. “I sat with them and explained to them the advantages of letting me use the bicycle. I told them it will make things easier for them too. I could just go on my cycle and get anything they needed from the shop nearby”, recalls Radha.
Social networks and support systems can be valuable in themselves, as people with friends and connections are generally happier, healthier and better off. At adolescence, however, for a girl from a disadvantaged background in India, a peer network can mean the difference between being allowed to travel to school 5 kms away with a group of girls or being forced to drop out of school for her safety and her family’s honor.

Despite the importance of peer networks, adolescent girls have fewer friends than adolescent boys. There are a variety of reasons for their limited peer network; these include restrictions on girls’ freedom of movement, their confinement to spaces such as home and school, limited opportunities to play, particularly outside their home, restrictions on their social interactions, and the burden of household chores.

Married adolescent girls are even less likely to have a group of friends, this leads to their isolation and makes them more vulnerable to abuse and violence within the home.

Achieving social connectivity by establishing social networks between young girls can be immensely powerful. These relationships not only have intrinsic value, but can also be instrumental in empowering girls to stand up for their rights. When girls unite to demand public services, or basic rights, or take actions to increase their own opportunities and enhance women’s decision-making power they directly challenge cultural attitudes and expectations to become the makers of social change and not just its beneficiaries.
In order to allow girls to develop their social networks, it is essential to support interventions that:

Create safe spaces and community platforms: Girls need access to a safe, neutral public space to connect with their friends, enjoy themselves and discuss the issues that affect them – this helps them develop strong relationships with other girls their age and grow as individuals.

**Strong networks provide support that influence individual behavior and increase the adolescent girl's power within the household.**

Develop female mentors/role models: Providing girls with strong female role models, offers them with an expanded sense of possibility of what they can achieve and also enable girls and women to acquire confidence and leadership skills.

Provide girls with access to local resources and health services: While creating peer networks are very useful, it also makes sense to use social gatherings to educate and inform young girls about health (including sexual and reproductive health) and connect them to non-formal education.
A group of girls living in Baraa village used to study in grade nine at a school in Srinagar. For many months, the girls had been complaining about the fact that the public bus would not stop at the Baraa bus stop.

"Every day, the bus would pass right by our bus stop, but would never stop. We do not know why. Maybe they didn't think that it is important for girls to go to school. But we were very upset because we had to walk to school every day and would end up getting late."

Finally, the girls decided to act together and demand their right to access public transport to be able to go to school. "We did not know whom to speak to, so we all of us went to the police station to lodge our complaint. We were aware that since we are young, the police could dismiss our demand. So we went in a big group—about 15 of us. The police did not take us seriously in the beginning but we did not give up and they had to intervene eventually." In a couple of days, one of the police officials spoke to the transport authorities and ensured that the girls were picked up from the bus stop every day.

"The experience taught us a lot. We have realized that rights, even the most basic ones, do not come easily. One has to have the confidence to fight for them."
Community leaders can greatly influence gender norms and “rules of the game” for adolescent girls

Across rural India, village elders, and clan leaders play a key role in influencing the lives of their community members. Clan-based leaders also establish unelected bodies in North India (Khap Panchayats) that impose restrictions on people within their village to protect societal morals. As expected, young girls are hit worst by these regressive actions, with Khap Panchayats banning everything from blue jeans to select food items in a bid to protect the moral values of their communities.

That being said, for an adolescent girl to gain access to the legal systems that have already been established for her protection, she needs to have social connectivity within her community. This can be obtained through interventions that engage within the communities and convince key influencers to lend their voices to the cause of the girl child.

Evidence shows that when social interventions engage with religious and community leaders and gain their support for a cause, this can have the most lasting impact on the ground.

Though this is a difficult outcome to achieve, changing the way key influencers perceive the girl child, in most cases, could lead to positive change for adolescent girls within the community. Despite the existence of various laws banning child marriage and child sex trafficking, effective implementation of such regulations can only take place with the support of the wider community.

For instance, despite the existence of legal sanctions against child marriage across India, it was only once 88 panchayats in the Vidarbha region of eastern Maharashtra resolved to ban child marriage in their villages, that people were influenced to terminate child marriages within their homes. The impact was immediate, with 18 families cancelling the weddings of their minor daughters in the first month of the ban.

Interventions that engage with the community to create awareness and sensitization about discriminatory practices against women harness the power of social connections and provide young girls with the support of the community.

Nonprofits working to eliminate sex trafficking of women, for example, often create vigilance committees within vulnerable communities to keep an eye out for their young girls, and protect them from being trafficked - these interventions are scalable and have direct impact on the reduction of trafficking activities.
Digital connectivity can be a great equalizer. For women in India, the Internet, mobile phone and other communication technology can be a gateway to a host of tangible benefits, such as job and education opportunities, health information, and crucial albeit less tangible benefits, such as confidence, self-esteem, and empowerment. Social interventions that work with adolescent girls from impoverished populations to provide them with both technology access and digital literacy could help them achieve the digital connectivity they need to transform their lives.

As recently as 12 February 2016, Suraj, a village in Gujarat banned the use of cellphones by young unmarried girls as village leaders claiming that it created disturbances, broke up families and ruined relationships. They have decided to fine girls INR 2,100 for using or possessing a mobile phone within the village. The informer gets INR 200 as a reward.

Despite the fact that the use of communications technology to promote the empowerment of women is a UN sustainable development goal, regressive practices mean that young girls have less access to mobile phones and technology than men their age. One in five girls in India believe the Internet is not “appropriate” for them and that being online would not be useful for them, and if they did, their families would disapprove.

Indian women are less likely than women across Egypt, Mexico and Uganda to have Internet access. Only 35% of all mobile internet users in India are women and 33% of all adolescent Facebook users are girls.

Across developing countries women are 50% less likely than men to access the Web in poor urban areas of the developing world and 30-50% less likely to use the Internet to increase their income or participate in public life.

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An adolescent girl in India is disconnected from her rights, from resources, and from relationships that are crucial in themselves as well as gateways to rights and resources. Interventions that help her negotiate family relationships, reach out to friends and mentors, influence community decision makers and access the collective knowledge of the world enable her to enter adulthood safe, seen and celebrated. And when that happens, the most disconnected person in India becomes the most empowered agent of change.

![Circles of Connectivity](image)

“Because of the Internet, I feel I am more confident. When I had to ask about something, I was reluctant to ask strangers and that was difficult. Now I don’t need to ask anyone. I can just go online and get the information”.

When community leaders, political leaders and religious heads work with the girls in their community and not against them, this can create the most lasting social change.

“I get a lot of offers and pressure to marry off my daughter but I disagree, telling them that my daughter doesn’t have the capability to understand what marriage is; moreover, she has the right to decide where to marry so when she will become about 18 to 20 years then we will see.” — Father, District Bikaner, Rajasthan.

“A strong network of friends increases a girl’s sense of well-being, allows her access to healthcare and relevant information, and develops her agency.”

A delay of even a year in the age of a girl’s marriage increases the chances of her becoming literate by 5.6%.

$170 billion over five years would be unlocked if we closed the developing world’s gender gap in mobile phone ownership.

Child marriages cancelled once local government leaders in Vidharba lent their support.

A delay of even a year in the age of a girl’s marriage increases the chances of her becoming literate by 5.6%.


15. Anonymous story from the ground, adapted from CREA’s draft annual report for 2015-16 (currently unpublished).

16. DISHA Project: Analysis of quantitative baseline survey data collected in select sites in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand, India. (2005). DISHA: The Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents. ICRW.


19. Quotes from Girls of Baraa village, Mahoba, Gramonnati Sansthan, Uttar Pradesh adapted from CREA's draft annual report for 2015-16 (currently unpublished).


Endnotes for ‘Circles of Influence’


(d) Mobile Internet in India for 2015 (2016). Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and IMRB International, e-Marketer calculations.


(f) DISHA Project: Analysis of quantitative baseline survey data collected in select sites in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand, India. (2005). DISHA: The Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents. ICRW.


Endnotes for ‘Circles of Connectivity’


