SHAKTI IMPACT 2013
The Shakti Approach

The Shakti Programme provides basic Life Skills training for adolescent girls living in dangerous and disadvantaged communities across Mumbai, Bhopal, Varanasi, Bhubaneswar and Patna. The programme is structured around a “curriculum” that is designed to inform and create awareness about risks, develop safety plans relevant to young girls, and to initiate self-directed action for making the environment safe and supportive. The pivot of the programme is the Shakti workbook which functions both as a tool and a space for the girls and the resource person to come together and initiate a conversation about safety and well being.

The group workbook utilized for this work usually runs for three months (but can be shortened or lengthened based on group needs) and engages ten to fifteen girls at a time. The Shakti Workbook culminates in a “graduation” and girls move into developing individual safety plans and continue to meet at Shakti Circle network events for the rest of the year. Particular to the period just after a girl graduates is her engagement in a self-designed and implemented community project where together groups of girls plan around girl safety and development within the community. This could range from themes like place to play, sanitation, education or child marriage.

While part of the program is structured, designed on the basis of what girls need and want to know in terms of laws, aspirations, options, stories of change and so on, part of this work is done through girls own feedback and suggestions.

During a survey with a sample of 300 Shakti graduates in 2013, Aangan found that girls reported sessions on negotiation and support people to be particularly valuable in helping prevent harm. In response to this, Aangan launched a new addition to the curriculum designed to help girls rehearse negotiation and connect to personal advocates. The flexibility to customize the curriculum depending on needs of the group is given to the community worker who runs the program with girls.

The Shakti approach focuses on enabling young girls to identify ‘problems,’ and elicit support within the community to work towards resolving them. This is a slippery slope for the girls to negotiate – members of the community are often impervious to the challenges faced by young girls. Worse still, sometimes communities perpetuate prevalent attitudes towards girls and end up creating impediments to their safety and well being.

The group task that Shakti girls undertake as part of their training helps to build required skills and gives them the confidence to engage with the adults in the community. For instance, a successful campaign for enrolling girls in school is not only about getting girls into school but also about learning to communicate, negotiate and build consensus around an issue that the community may not necessarily view with an empathetic eye. They also learn to identify sources of support from the municipality, police, etc. and become active agents in accessing rights and services.

In a sense, the process of initiating change becomes in itself a means for reflecting on inherited perceptions, attitudes and practices that affect the life of young girls, both for the community as well as the girls themselves. The ‘success’ of the initiatives that the Shakti girls undertake depends on the support that they are able to garner from their families, communities and from the immediate circle of local State functionaries (like Ward Commissioners, for example).
Overall Increase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Average increase (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to identify risk</td>
<td>43.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to articulate safeguards and strategies about how they might prevent</td>
<td>54.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>dangerous situations and keep safe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational and Vocational Aspirations</td>
<td>70.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Found support to cope with situations of gender discrimination, abuse,</td>
<td>60.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>oppression, atrocities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrates negotiation skills around 3 key issues like child marriage,</td>
<td>55.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>pressure to drop out, and hazardous work</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Identifies positive role models for school/work</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence to speak up and participate in family/home decision making</td>
<td>55.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have at least one person to confide in</td>
<td>25.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affect change for community and self</td>
<td>59.88</td>
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**A Safe Space for Action**

Shakti groups give young girls the space to think about themselves and their lives – something that is absent from their lives. The chance to come together as a group and speak about themselves is hugely empowering for most of them for whom silence about safety issues is the norm.

By working in a group, they develop networks and create a supportive space to express themselves. Sometimes the girls who come to the group don’t know each other although they are in the same community as they are confined and restricted to homes or are at work all day. This in itself is a movement towards empowerment as they begin to see their shared concerns and begin to support each other.

They come together as a cohort and begin to look at their lives and start imagining a future for themselves. The Safety & Life Plan exercises, for instance, gives them concrete steps to begin to visualize a career and identify concrete and realistic steps to move towards it. Although fun and social interaction is part of the Shakti group activity, it is different from casual interaction that girls may have with each other. Here they discuss their dreams, aspirations as they develop their own visiting cards or 'who is a safe person' who might support them in times of crisis or encourage them - as opposed to the 'usual' things they may discuss in other groups as they go to school or go about their chores. They actually learn to articulate realistic life goals, chalk out an action plan to fulfill them, and set small measurable targets that will take them towards their life goals. They also identify group goals for which they support each other – for instance safety plans that affect them as a group in the community. They work out strategies to keep safe together as a group.

Often Shakti groups act like a fresh mirror in which they can begin to see themselves and their situation in a new light. For instance, many girls accept violence and unsafe situations as a given ('that's how life is'). However, when the girls are introduced to the idea of 'unsafe situations' in everyday life, they begin to recognize potentially unsafe situations that they face. Articulation of the 'unsafe' situation is an important moment that helps them in the process for dealing with it. The idea that they have a right to be safe and that they can take steps to ensure it is an immensely powerful one that catalyzes change in other areas of their lives. For example, one of the girls recognized that early marriage is an 'unsafe situation' for her. Thereafter, it became an issue that the group decided to tackle in the community.
Ability to identify risk

It is important for Shakti girls to understand situations, persons or conditions that could potentially be safe and unsafe in order for them to plan strategies and catch early warning signs.

The figure below represents the responses of girls who could identify unsafe people or situations before and after the completion of the Shakti program.

The largest change was seen in Varanasi and Bhopal, while the lowest change was seen in Bhubaneswar. Of the girls who were able to identify unsafe persons in their lives as compared to a mere 31.11% and 28.06% at the start of the program, respectively.

In terms of naming a family member/situation that was unsafe, girls spoke mainly of pressure from family to get married as a situation when they felt unsafe.

Through certain sessions such as ‘Suraksha Chakra’, ‘Aas aas: kyu kaha kaun’, girls are asked to identify places, people and situations that are safe and unsafe for them. These sessions help girls understand the importance of becoming aware of such situations in order to protect themselves. These sessions help girls systematically think of their dangers, and thereby help the girl take her first steps to feeling safe.

Most girls identified the public toilet as an unsafe place in their community. In many communities it was observed that either the public toilets were very dimly lit itself or the road to the toilet had no street lights, which made it extremely risky and unsafe for girls. Girls also mostly identified neighbors or local groups of boys on the street as being most unsafe for them. Very few girls identified some person from within the family as being unsafe, contrary to national statistics which point to family members being dangerous in terms of abuse, marriage.
'What does Shakti do?'

The extent to which Shakti as a life skills programme impacts the lives of adolescent girls on the ground depends on the confluence of several factors. Neither is it possible to attribute changes in their lives solely to Shakti as an intervention, nor project in what ways girls will draw on their Shakti experience to ensure their safety and well being later in their lives. However, there have been specific instances where the Shakti approach has helped them make concrete shifts in their lives – as individuals and as a group.

While attending Shakti Groups, girls become aware of their aspirations, often for the first time and dreams and learn to take steps to actualize them. In the process they learn to communicate with their families and the community, to negotiate and access help from the State machinery that is mandated to work for their safety and protection. It enables children to secure for themselves what they desire – be it enrollment in school, a safe toilet or escape from early marriage which could abort her desire for basic education and self reliance.

These vignettes reflect the 'successful' moments where girls have been able to break through established practices and norms to move towards charting their Life Plans. They also illustrate the approach of the Shakti programme and highlight ways in which it works to ‘empower’ young girls to take steps to ensure their safety and well being. It responds to the oft asked question ‘what does Shakti do?’ in multiple and concrete ways.

**IMPACT 2013**

**Identifies positive role models for school/work**

Shakti helps connect girls to such role models with the belief that it keeps girls motivated. By looking at the struggles and hardships role models go through, it perhaps inspires resilience to work through failures or challenges. A role model could be a peer who is doing well in school, a community member who is doing well for themselves, a teacher, a parent or anyone else who inspires girls.

Given the benefits of having a role model and the important role they play in people’s lives, every girl is asked if she can identify a positive role model in their lives, who can inspire them to study, work and be financially independent. Only about 46.98% girls were able identify such people before Shakti. This increased to 93.98%.

The figure below represents the responses of girls who were able to successful identify a role model.

In most cities, the girls identified as their role models teachers in their schools, older sisters who girls felt were good and hardworking, mothers who girls respected and appreciated or other community members who inspired them. For girls from the Bharlai community in Varanasi, one of their own Shakti group mates, Sunita has become a role model. Sunita is a peer coach for Shakti in Varanasi. She is the only girl in her community who goes outside the community to do work (conducts Shakti sessions in other communities).

In another survey conducted by Aangan with 218 Shakti girls in January 2014 on the relevance and usefulness of developing personal safety plans, a majority of the girls in all five states reported to enhanced feelings of safety through the knowledge about laws and rights of woman and children. Some girls believe this has helped them learn to identify situations in which their rights have been violated and has given them some confidence to stand up for themselves as they now know that they have laws to support them.
Priya was part of the Shakti Group in Reay Road. She belonged to a migrant Tamil group, most of whom were construction laborers living on a daily wage. Priya's mother was the active parent and made the decisions for the family – presumably her father remained in the native village.

Within the Shakti Work Book, there is section on child rights and legal protection for children. Child Marriage is one of the issues listed in them. Since this is a common practice in the community, the girls decided to discuss this as a group task. For Priya, who was part of this group, it had a special significance. Long ago, she had been informed by her mother that soon she would be sent back to her village in Tamil nadu and married to her thirty year old maternal uncle. Priya was thirteen years old.

During other sessions in Shakti, Priya and her peers had mulled over what she wanted to do in the immediate future. And like many others in the group, she too had concluded that it was very important for her to continue her studies and get a basic education so that she could get work or have the option of a career. But the talk of marriage increased and threatened to turn her plan upside down.

Priya was distressed – she did not want to get married at this age and disrupt her education. Her peers from the Shakti Group were anxious for her and were aware of the ways in which the marriage would be disastrous for her. After all, they had studied the Work Book together and had learned that apart from stunting a girl's chance of fulfilling her dreams and ambitions, the practice was also a crime punishable by law. They wanted to intervene – but were not sure how they could. Their resolve grew stronger when they realized that Priya too was desperate to wriggle out of the situation.

The wedding was to take place in Priya's native village in December. She told her Shakti friends that every time she protested and resisted, her mother beat her up badly. It looked as if her fate had been sealed.

The situation was discussed in the Shakti group. As a first step the girls felt that the Shakti Didi (Aangan social worker) ought to approach the mother. Didi paid Priya's mother a visit and brought up the topic of marriage very tentatively. She discussed the ways in which the marriage would come in the way of Priya's desire to complete her studies, and therefore her future prospects. She did not bring up the issue of legality that would put the mother on the defensive. After the meeting, the girls learned that Priya had been beaten up again for 'confiding in outsiders.' A couple of weeks passed. The girls felt that they needed to do something that would give them the confidence to pursue the issue.

The community was busy preparing for the Ganpati festival and the pandals were being decorated. The Shakti Girls decided to use this opportunity to reach out to the community. They made posters that pronounced Child Marriage as a criminal offense and displayed these prominently at the Puja venues. They used the festive gatherings to talk to people about the need to stop the practice of child marriage in their community. The outreach attempt gave the girls the confidence to approach Priya's mother. At the end of this exercise, the girls felt that they made people aware about the issue and now believed they could count on the community should the need arise.

The girls prepared for their encounter with Priya's mother: there were several mock sessions on how to approach the topic and negotiate with her. They decided to approach her in small groups so as to help sustain the 'campaign.'

However, their meeting was fruitless. The mother was adamant to get Priya married. However they could manage to buy Priya a little time. Her mother agreed that she would postpone the wedding from December to May which would allow Priya to complete her school exams.

Although this was a small victory, the girls were nervous about the impending marriage. However, an opportunity presented itself when they learned that Priya's mother was in dire need of money. The girls came up with a plan. One of them had identified a couple of jobs that could tide Priya and her mother over lean times. They suggested that both Priya and her mother take the opportunity to supplement their income and Priya was able to demonstrate that their could be look after herself financially, given a chance. When school re-opened, Priya managed to convince her mother to allow her to continue for another year.

*Names changed to protect identity*
But the issue of marriage surfaced again. This time the Shakti didi requested Child Line, an emergency rescue to intervene and bring up the issue of legality as all other avenues had been exhausted. The Child Line team made a visit and advised the mother that she was in the process of committing a crime that was punishable all over the country, even in the village where she planned to perform the marriage. As part of her Shakti Safety Plan, Priya was also given emergency numbers – including the distress line number in case her mother planned to whisk her away to her village. The marriage was stalled.

It has been almost two years since the issue of Priya’s marriage was addressed. She is continuing her education and will soon finish high School. The Shakti coordinator recently met her mother and congratulated her for supporting her daughter to fulfill her desire to study. Her mother believes that if when she finishes school then she will be able to support herself financially and maybe one day take care of both of them, an option to marriage that she had never considered.

What Worked

Much of the ‘success’ of Priya’s story can be attributed to the effort that went into preparing a support system that made it possible to push against convention and ‘culture.’

Girls who always assumed they could not change their fate, came out and discussed the topic of child marriage amongst themselves as well as with adult women (some of them their mothers) in the Shakti groups. They talked about their life –plans, which were dependent on their getting a basic education, becoming financially independent and building a network of supporters and allies.

In these discussions, women had a non-threatening space to re-look at the impact of child marriage on the quality of life of girls. These discussions, stressed on the fallout of education ie enhanced income and employment opportunities. These conversations were contextualized in the everyday life of the community, with familiar examples to bolster arguments. For instance, the stories of girls who were abandoned by their husbands soon after an early marriage were used to make a case for education as a safe-guard against such situations.

Thus the focus on options and safeguards rather than exclusively providing legal knowledge were more powerful influences to re-think child marriage. These interventions ensured that there was some level of support for Priya.

Shakti conversations also set the terms for mothers to think about the future of their own daughters. If not, many girls from Priya’s Shakti cohort might have found themselves in her situation.

At the start of the Shakti program it was found that a small percentage of girls in every city were able to identify situation of gender discrimination and occasion where she was being oppressed. Many of the girls were not aware of the services or facilities that were available to support and help them in such situation.

It was noticed that many of these girls had internalized the discrimination that happened against them and never thought of it as a violation of their rights. Shahana, 17, now a peer leader in Mumbai, used to think that it was her duty to stop studying after Class 10 so her family could have money to spend on her younger brother’s tuition fee. Reshma, 13, Bhopal, used to drop her younger brother off to school everyday. She had stopped going to school about a year back after completing Class 5. She said being the elder sister it was her ‘duty’ to look after her younger siblings and anyway the “brother needed the education more than her so that he can grow up and support the family.”

After completing Shakti, however, the findings show that the girls’ knowledge about this area changed significantly. It was found that after sessions such as ‘Aao dosti kare’, ‘Rishte’ and ‘Aao aage badhe’ which focus on making girls aware about situations of discrimination and the people whom they can approach if they experience the same, helped girls understand discrimination and oppression.

The city of Mumbai was found to have been impacted the most, with 95.83% of the girls being able to identify situations of discrimination and services accessible for the same as compared to just 15.14% at the start.

In Bhopal, there was a 70.35% increase in the number of girls who could identify such situations and articulate services they could access.

In Patna and Varanasi, the number of girls who were able to identify situation in which they were being discriminated against and oppressed increased significantly with 94.28% and 85.38% of girl correctly identifying such situations.

In Bhubaneswar, the number of girls whose understanding of these situations improved after Shakti increased two fold.

In order to gain access to rights and opportunities, girls reported that sessions that combined the identification of a support person along with rehearsal around negotiation was especially helpful.
Shakti groups are spaces for girls to come together to discuss concerns and arrive at strategies to address everyday threats to their freedom and safety. It is also about building confidence and life skills that enable them to address these situations by learning to negotiate with various actors both inside and outside the community.

The Shakti facilitator (Didi) uses several 'tools' such as workbooks and life plan cards in order to start a conversation about critical life issues helping children think through their situation as group as well as affect change in their own lives as individuals. Part of the Shakti process is to provide a space for girls to identify the core of a problem area that prevents them from 'doing things' or making changes that would enable them to have a better chance at education, mobility, safety etc. would ultimately help them take some control over their present and to plan for a future. Sometimes this could mean something as simple as making it possible to attend school. Except something as basic as school education is inaccessible for girls for a host of other reasons.

The process of learning to identify a problem is a transformative one for the girls. It helps to articulate the crux of the problem, envision a solution and formulate strategies to work towards the solution. This story is about how a Shakti Group's Hand Pump project that opened doors to school education for many girls in Hardaspur, Patna.

Hardasapur is a poor community inhabited by wood workers, daily wage laborers, and domestic workers. There was a high incidence of domestic violence and alcoholism in the community, which generates an atmosphere of fear and repression for women and girls. When the Shakti programme was initiated in Hardaspur, most adolescent girls had been enrolled in government school but were unable to attend it regularly – parents kept them at home to do the household chores. The general attitude of parents was that girls did not need to be educated as their role was to provide the household labour. Of course, the girls' own aspirations did not find a place in this plan.

When the Shakti coordinator made her first visit, she found that there was no space for meetings. The girls came together to clear the goat pen and this became the Shakti group venue.

Despite discussions, girls longed for education. They detested the boredom of being stuck at home all day alone doing house chores. Yet they were unable to attend school regularly. While untangling the threads to the 'problem', they talked about the restrictions on their mobility. Their access to the 'outside' was strictly monitored. Some of them were domestic workers in homes outside but were not 'allowed' to attend school or enjoy a free moment with their peers.

Ironically, domestic chores took them away from home – they needed to collect firewood, wash clothes and fetch water from quite a distance. There was no water source inside or near the settlement which meant that they made three trips to collect water. It left them with little spare time. Somewhere through the process of discussing future plans and factors that block their path, the girls said “Didi, it is all about water.” With this they took the first step towards change.
How do a group of young girls with no access to the local administration take on the task of bringing water to a slum? What could they draw on to represent themselves as ‘legitimate’ spokes-people for a community that marginalized them in multiple ways? Naturally, they used the only space available to them to discuss possible ways of addressing the problem – the Shakti Group. Through their discussions with the Didi, they decided that it would be a good idea to build consensus in the community through a signature campaign. It allowed them to meet people in the community, get their support while also building a ‘case’ that could then be presented to the local municipal functionary.

The daunting task of approaching the ‘sarkari’ authority (government authority) required a coordinated team effort. Some girls took on the responsibility of writing out the application to the civic body, others collected signatures. Was it easy for a group of girls to get the adults to co-operate? Obviously not. Initially, most adults did not sign the petition - they mocked the girls and tried to suggest that no ward commissioner would make an appearance at Hardaspur. The girls had prepared their arguments in the Shakti group and were ready to face the cynicism. Their main line was to convince the community about the power of a collective campaign.

Whom do they approach to take things forward? The next step was to identify the ‘right’ person to petition – someone who had the authority to take decisions. Part of the Shakti group activities was to map the public services and government authorities that the slum community could access. Through this exercise, the girls understood that they needed to approach the Ward Commissioner. In preparation for this, the designated group went through several mock sessions in order to formulate a clear and precise argument. The Didi had warned them that it would help them to make a convincing argument by sticking to the ‘facts’ and focusing on the issue.

The scheduled meeting with the Ward Commissioner was a smooth affair. The girls emphasized that a hand pump in the community would give them access to education and a chance to a better life. The Ward Commissioner was very impressed and congratulated the girls on the clear and confident way in which they had presented the issue. He promised to visit Hardaspur and to provide a pump within a couple of months.

However, this was not the end of the story. Girls followed up the Ward Commissioner’s office regularly in order to keep up the pressure. Within the community they identified possible locations taking into account diverse sets of needs in the community – they did not want last minute conflicts to come in the way.

The pump arrived. The girls’ esteem in the community went up a notch or two. The adults in the community commented, “we did not think that girls do this.” It won the girls the much sought after freedom to attend school regularly. Much of the cynicism they faced was wiped away.

Their first taste of ‘success’ has given them the confidence to push for change in other areas. When they discovered the school too had no water facility, they initiated a petition. Currently, a group of girls (assisted by the peer leaders) is in the process of helping members of the community to get BPL cards.

And it all began with discussions in a goat pen.
Educational and vocational aspirations

Before Shakti, few girls believed they might complete education, reporting that they would drop out either because of family pressure to marry, stay home for reasons related to traditional beliefs or because they wouldn’t be able to cope. When asked if they had thought about a plan in terms of education or work that could ensure their financial independence, only a small number had done so – 21.20% – with girls in Varanasi feeling particularly hopeless about pursuing any kind of aspiration – only 7% believed that education or vocational courses could lead to financial independence.

By the end of Shakti, this improved greatly with the number across cities being as high as 91.77%. This significant change of 70.57% could, to some extent, be attributed to Shakti sessions such as 'Mol Tol' which centre around the theme of financial independence to affect change for oneself coupled with the concrete exercise of putting down education goals as part of one’s personal safety plan.

Neha, a rescued minor from the Jaitpura Aftercare Home, Varanasi, realized that she is very creative although she believed this talent would have little importance, she developed a plan to become a craft teacher for school children. Her dream was reinforced when she was able to “pilot” her idea in a small way with the help of her Shakti group. She conducted a card-making workshop with Shakti girls in the rescue home and found that she was very capable. In Mumbai and Bhopal, the impact of the Shakti program was significantly high, with 96% of the girls stating that they had made a plan as compared to 21.6% and 26.85% respectively. Girls in Bhubaneswar were also found to be impacted by the session on life planning with 86.12% of the girls reporting that they made an educational plan after Shakti as compared to 16.75% at the start. Patna also was found to show a large increase in the number of girls who made an educational plan as well, with 79.99% as compared to 33.74% at the beginning of the program.
Affect change for community and self

The Shakti program aims to not only help girls bring about changes in their own homes but it is also aimed at motivating girls to affect change in their communities, with the assumption that demonstrating the ability to bring change in one sphere will impact the other.

It is apparent from the figure below that there was a sense of hopelessness before the program. Only 8.66% girls believed they could make a difference as compared to an extremely high 68.54% post Shakti.

The figure below provides a representation of the responses of girls who feel confident to bring about change in their communities.

When asked which aspect of the program stood out in this context, a large number of girls referred to one component of the Shakti program – a community project they conceptualize, develop and run themselves. Here, girls are required, as a group to identify the most pressing problems affecting them and other girls in their communities. They are asked to pick one problem that they would like to address. In the last year, girls have identified a variety of issues of toilets being far away from their communities, the absence of street lights in their community and child marriage as being problems for girls. Girls are then encouraged to think of innovative ways to bring about change in the chosen area. In the past years, girls have visited government offices to give in applications and hold meetings with senior officials and have had rallies and signature campaigns to create awareness of chosen issues.
The Camel in the Tent
Govandi, Mumbai

Given the fact that an adolescent girl’s life choices are often not her own but monitored fiercely by the family, it is critical that girls in Shakti learn to work towards shifting perceptions, attitudes and practices within the family. Sometimes, this involves a long term and sustained engagement on their part. And, like the proverbial camel trying to enter the tent, it means that they make space for their dreams and aspiration by using whatever foot-hold that is offered to them. This is a daunting task as sometimes the young girl has to confront cultural norms that have the sanction of the community at large.

Sakeena* is pursuing a BMS degree in a college close to Govandi where she lives. She has plans to pursue a professional degree on completing her Bachelors. This is something most girls aspire for except, for Sakeena it has has been fought for and won with great patience and doggedness.

Govandi is a large settlement with several communities. Many of them are migrants from North India. The sub-communities are closely bound by their shared cultural and belief systems.

Sakeena has been associated with Shakti at the Govandi centre over the past 4 years. After working with the group, she is now a peer leader who mobilizes girls and actually facilitates sessions. Through her work in the Shakti group, and later as a peer leader, Sakeena has developed the confidence and skills required to make space for her aspirations within the family. She can formulate a persuasive argument, and has learned the art of negotiation. She has displayed maturity and resilience, especially in critical situations. One such moment offered her an opportunity to reiterate the 'power of knowledge' that is attributed to education.

One day the police arrived at Sakeena’s home, and threatened to take her married sister to the police station. They were acting on a complaint that her estranged in-laws had lodged against her. Sakeena, who was aware of the law thanks to her Shakti group, prevented the police from taking her sister to the station. She faced them at the moment of crisis and quoted the relevant provisions relating to the arrest of women. Her family was very impressed by the way she handled the situation. The incident perhaps gave her a foothold to push her plans ahead. Then on, she was able to get a lot more support from the family.

Although it went against the family’s traditional practices, Sakeena has slowly been able to convince them to stall marriage plans and allow her to enroll in college (Bachelors). Sakeena hopes to pursue a CA and make a career for herself. And perhaps she will.

*Names changed to protect identity

IMPACT 2013

Confidence to speak up and participate in family/home decision making

Like many Indian girls, Shakti girls reported that they were brought up to think that they must be quiet and listen to elders at home, especially males. They reported to accepting the fact that they would not be included in decision-making processes, even when the decision concerns them. Therefore, having to speak up at home can was considered a daunting task for any girl in the group.

Before the start of Shakti a very small percentage of girls in every city was found to have the confidence and courage to speak up to her family. However, after graduating from Shakti, the findings were very different, with immense change in the number of girls feeling confident to stand up to her family and participate in her home. Connected to this, girls said it was awareness about her rights, about services she can access, that helped increase confidence and be more participatory in decision-making processes. This can clearly be seen in our findings. Example: Some girls took up the issue of having key documents at home. As part of their Shakti activities, they spoke to families about the importance of having identification and volunteered to make a documents file for the family.

Across all 5 cities the change in confidence levels has been dramatic. The largest change was seen with girls in Bhopal where 92.38% girls indicated that they feel confident to speak up at home, resulting in an increase of 67.93% from the start of the program.
The extent to which Shakti as a life skills programme impacts the lives of adolescent girls on the ground depends on the confluence of several factors. Some group tasks taken up by Shakti girls have resulted in concrete changes in their lives. While the 'success' stories illustrate the moments when strategy, action and community support have come together for a positive outcome, there have been instances when things have not gone as hoped for.

These narratives reflect the 'trouble spots' that the Shakti girls have encountered through the process for working to change or addressing a problem situation.

'Failure' takes on many forms. Sometimes gaps in strategy or action plan have led to 'stalled efforts.' Sometimes they have also created problematic situations for the girls in the community. Communities too have placed blocks in their path because of their reluctance to give up inherited ideas, attitudes and practices (such as early marriage for girls). Sometimes aborted attempts are indicative of a larger apathy among local State functionaries and administrative machinery. In the worst situations, all these factors combine to pose hurdles that ensure that 'status quo' is maintained.

These stories illustrate the enormity of the task that young girls face. If they are to make a small shift in community perception or practices that impact their lives, the girls have to encounter a system that is sometimes neither empathetic to their right to safety, dignity, nor supportive of their need for actualizing their aspirations.

In all instances it is useful to reflect on where the glitches might have appeared and why.

How was Priya saved from an early marriage whereas Seema’s marriage couldn’t be stopped in Wadala? Why do the best intentions and sincere action encounter hurdles?
The Wadala settlement is a tightly knit community where families are bound by shared norms and customs. One such is the practice of early marriage for girls. Despite the fact that child marriage is prohibited by law, it is prevalent and endorsed by the community as a ‘custom’ that remains unquestioned and challenged despite it being a crime in the eyes of the law.

In the course of a Shakti group, one of the peer leaders informed the coordinator that Seema, a girl of 13 was soon to be married. The group decided that it needed to be addressed. The first step was to talk to the mother and grandmother but that did not help. The issue was taken up with the parents and the community but they were unmoved. Seema’s mother retorted: “I was married when I was 9 years old and have four children. I am still alive, aren’t I? So why the fuss?”

None of the arguments used in Priya’s case in Reay Road worked: the promise of better living standards through higher education and enhanced income had no impact. ‘Our daughters don’t work’ was the mother’s response. All efforts hit a dead end.

Seema’s wedding card was circulated within the community. The Shakti coordinator was at a loss – should she allow the marriage to take place? Should it not be reported to the authorities as demanded by law? After much debate, the Didi (coordinator) decided to inform the police and Child Line. She requested them not name her as the source of the complaint, as she wanted to continue to work in the community and rapport and relationship was important for this.

Acting on the complaint, Child Line made a visit and picked up Seema and took her to the interim government home. However, she was sent back to her parents and was never produced before the Child Welfare Committee. Nor was her case recorded. On what grounds had they acted? Seema’s parents had come armed with a letter from the Women and Child Department from the State office demanding the release of their daughter. And they had complied.

Seema was married the very next day.

Looking Back

The story of ‘Seema’ was discussed in the Shakti meeting. The peer leader who brought the case to the note group felt distressed that ‘they had done everything’ but hadn’t been able to ‘save Seema.’

What didn’t work? Why did the marriage take place despite evoking the legal machinery?

Seema’s ‘illegal’ marriage became a reality because the family, community and state functionaries all acted together to bypass the law. Although their motivations may have been different, the outcome was determined by their combined efforts.

- Community Support
In Priya’s case (Reay Road), the girls had worked intensively building awareness about the legal implications of child marriage. They had spent time discussing the issue with the community. In Wadala, the discourse around child marriage (both in social and legal terms) was absent, with limited discussion on the implications of the practice on the life of the girl. There was widespread acceptance of early marriage as ‘custom’ and the legality aspect has had little impact on ‘custom.’ The community was therefore not ready to support any opposition to Seema’s marriage. In this scenario perhaps there needed to be a more intense and involved engagement with the community to start a conversation on the issue.

- Apathy of state functionaries
Child Line in Reay Road could play the role of a ‘bad cop’ by pointing out the criminal aspect of the practice, because there were voices in the community that opposed it. In Wadala, Child Line, the police and the state department of Women and Child followed the direction given by political elements who did not wish to ‘interfere’, although they were mandated by law to do so. There was little Aangan or the girls could do given this politically charged scenario.

- Seema’s Position
Primarily Seema was not against the marriage – she had convinced herself that she was ‘in-love’ with the boy. He was friend of her brother’s and an orphan. Her situation at home was not a happy one – she did the domestic work and look after her parents and brothers. She wasn’t allowed to go to school. Perhaps this was an escape into an environment that she felt would have more control over own life as there were no in-laws to contend with in her future marital home. She therefore had no motivation to stop the marriage and nor was she convinced that she needed to. Whereas in Priya’s case, she was willing to suffer blows in order to prevent the marriage.

*Names changed to protect identity*
It was almost a given that 16-year-old Poonam from the Samadhar Path community in Patna would be married off to the next proposal that came. Her parents didn’t want to take a chance after what happened with their oldest daughter. Poonam’s eldest sister ran away with her boyfriend and got married. Thus, they insisted that Poonam had to drop out of school. It was extremely difficult to convince her parents against getting her married. After several rehearsal role plays and discussions with her Shakti group and the facilitator, Poonam found the courage to speak to her father. Not only that, but she was able to negotiate going back to school and delaying a marriage.
Have at least one person to confide in

Having at least one person to confide in and to talk about ones problems is essential for the mental health of a person. Feeling a connection to another person has found to have benefits to one’s health, sense of self and overall happiness with life. However, as seen in the Aangan’s report of the vulnerability checklist, 2013, a large majority of girls in all 5 cities have been found to be isolated and confined. They are not allowed to leave their homes and have friendships outside their home, making them vulnerable to a number of negative mental problems.

This figure represents the responses of the girls who can identify at least one person they can confide in.

From the figure above, it can be seen that in Varanasi, many of the girls (96.16%) were able to identify a person they trust and confided in at the start of Shakti. By the end of Shakti however, all the girls were able to identify somebody they could confide in.

Often, through the course of Shakti the girls in a particular group become very close. When attending Shakti sessions, the girls begin to realize that they are not experiencing problems in isolation; however, there are certain problems that all the girls in the group are experiencing together. This automatically allows them to identify with other girls and thereby makes them feel more connected to them. The girls are also required to maintain confidentiality regarding sensitive information that may come up during the course of these sessions. This builds a sense of trust and respect and acceptance for each other’s lives and experiences, thereby strengthening bonds among the girls. In the study on the importance of case management and planning in an individual girl’s life, conducted this year by Aangan, it was seen that almost half the number of girls interviewed reported having a friend as their ‘safe’ or ‘trustworthy’ person. A large majority also pointed out that it would be their ‘mother’ who would support them the most in a difficult situation.

Often after Shakti sessions are concluded, girls feel confident that they can trust other girls in their group and often identify these girls as people the can confide in. Others who girls have often identified as their go-to person were parents and older sisters. For one girl in Govandi in Mumbai, it was the Social Worker at the Urban Health Centre in her community to whom she could confide about the marriage talks happening at home and her desire to stand against it. Just the act of sharing this with someone and having felt supported gave her confidence to speak up at home as well.

The largest impact was seen in Bhopal with an increase in 94.9% of girls being able to identify at least one person they could confide in. Patna followed with 84.37% of girls able to name one person they could trust as compared to just 45.98% at the start of Shakti. In Bhubaneswar, there was found to be a 22.49% increase in the number of girls who could identify a confidant. Finally, Mumbai saw a small but praise-worthy increase in the number of girls who could identify a person they could trust with 98.89% as compared to 83.30% at the start of the program.
Shakti groups provide girls a safe space to talk about issues that are taboo in their homes and in the community at large. One of the exercises in the Shakti workbook focuses on helping girls to identify safe and unsafe situations in their immediate environment. Through this process, the girls in a community in Patna lifted the lid on child abuse – something that a number of girls face in their daily lives but are rarely able to tackle.

Abuse, the intimate enemy needed to be addressed if the girls were to secure their right to be safe. The group decided to launch an awareness campaign in the community.

Posters were designed to spread awareness about abuse. They displayed help line numbers for the benefit of victims of abuse. The girls began plastering the walls of the community. The campaign triggered an immediate response from the community – but unfortunately an adverse one. It met with anger and hostility.

This was a community where abuse rampant. But no body in the community had broken the silence around it, and that too in public. When the posters went up in the community, it was as if a match had been lit under dry tinder.

The posters were torn down. "Who has been discussing these filthy things with you? Why are you indulging in these shameless activities and polluting the community?" were some of the questions that the adults threw at the girls. Frightened and intimidated, the girls abandoned the campaign. They were confined to the homes and were unable to attend the group. It became difficult for the Shakti peer group leader to continue working in the community.

What didn’t work?

The community was not prepared to break the silence around sexual abuse that was deeply rooted amidst them. It had one unchallenged. Suddenly it had been 'outed' by a group of 'mere girls' and had therefore sparked the outrage.

What could have been done differently?

Given the charged nature of the issue, a strategy was required to approach the issue gradually over a longer period of time. It needed to include ground work to build a support base of adults who could become potential advocates for the campaign. This might have included working with adult women of the community through discussions and meetings to allow the issue to surface in a safe manner.

The peer leader of this particular group lacked the experience and support to channelize the girls' thirst for action into safer waters from which they could initiate a 'soft' but effective strategy. The overt public campaign on abuse left the community feeling 'shamed' and therefore hostile.

Looking back, the story demonstrates that things face impediments if consensus isn’t built and support before taking any action that concerns the community. It also highlights that young girls are vulnerable and exposed to criticism and censure by a community that retaliates if boundaries are crossed. Any action to initiate change needs to be measured, keeping in mind the volatile nature of the environment that girls have to work with. It therefore underscores the need for developing communication and negotiation skills along with strategy building, all of which are emphasized in the Shakti groups.
Ability to articulate safeguards and strategies about how they might prevent dangerous situations and keep safe

The figure below represents the responses of girls who were able to articulate safe guards

It was found that although a number of girls were able to articulate safeguards for themselves at the start of Shakti – 38.27% – the situation improved after Shakti, increasing to 93.03%.

The greatest improvement was found in Mumbai with 99.44% of girls being able to articulate safeguards as compared to just 28.06% at the beginning of Shakti.

In Bhopal, 93.79% of the girls were able to successfully articulate safe guards resulting in a 58.92% increase.

Varanasi saw number of girls being able to communicate their safeguards increase twofold, while Bhubaneswar saw a 53.11% increase.

Finally, in Patna 90.36% of the girls were able to successfully identify and communicate their safeguards.

Most girls were able to clearly conceptualize procedures they needed to follow in order to protect themselves and keep themselves safe. Choosing a “safe person” who could be approached in times of crisis or if girls felt unsafe was another key strategy. In many instances, girls chose their mothers, older sisters, boyfriends and friends to be their safe person who would support them and help them when the need arose. For example, one Shakti girl from Kothiya community in Patna identified her school principal to be her safeguard, in July 2013, when her parents were keen on getting her married at just 17. The Principal met Sneha’s parents and convinced them to postpone the marriage. She believes that had she tried to do this on her own, her family would have disregarded her completely. But having an ally like the school Principal talk to them about laws, options and her future helped tremendously.