POLICY BRIEF

Voices of the future

How gender-transformative safe spaces strengthen girls' agency in India

ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Center for Universal Education at BROOKINGS

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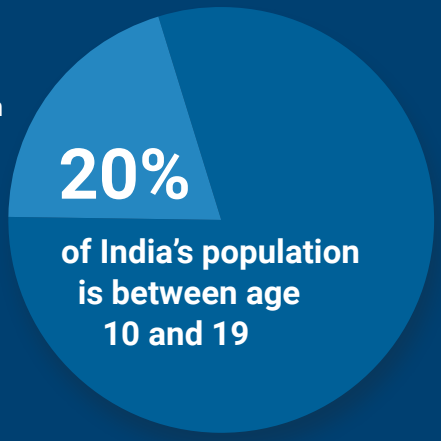
Executive summary

As one of the fastest growing economies globally, India aims to achieve high middle-income status by 2047, in part through emphasizing women-led development. In a demographically young country, where one in every five people is 10 to 19 years old, how can India be women-led in the future without being girl-led now?

Strengthening the agency of India's 120 million adolescent girls—including ensuring their safety, health, and education—is vital for the country's progress. However, socio-cultural norms and limited access to information and spaces to develop key relationships and competencies significantly constrain their potential.

Growing evidence underscores the potential transformative impact of safe spaces where girls can develop knowledge, skills, beliefs, and relationships that support their agency. This policy brief explores the potential transformative impact of gender-transformative safe spaces (GTSS) for adolescent girls in marginalized communities in South India. It presents evidence of the ways in which such spaces empower girls by providing critical knowledge, skills, and solidarity, enabling them to exercise agency and drive social change.

The brief recommends establishing GTSS in schools, enhancing community engagement, and promoting multisectoral collaboration to dismantle intergenerational cycles of oppression. By investing in initiatives that prioritize girls' agency, India can ensure a prosperous and gender-equal future for all its citizens.



I. Introduction

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, with aspirations to reach high middle-income status by 2047, the centenary of Indian independence (World Bank 2023). As host of the G20 Leaders' Summit in 2023, India set out six national priorities, including "women-led development." Given that India is a demographically young country, where one in every five people is 10 to 19 years old (UNICEF, n.d.-b), how can India be women-led in the future without being girl-led now?

With around 120 million adolescent girls (Verma et al. 2019), India stands to benefit socially, politically, and economically by not only guaranteeing that they are safe, healthy, educated, and equipped with information and life skills but also ensuring that they are fully able to exercise their agency, understood as the capacity of women and girls to take purposeful action and pursue goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and KIT [hereinafter, Gates Foundation] 2017).

Yet adolescent girls in India are frequently exposed to complex socio-cultural expectations as well as pernicious social norms that devalue girls and constrain their ability to move freely and make decisions affecting their work, education, marriage and social relationships (UNICEF, n.d.-b). Further, they often lack access to information on issues affecting their lives and have limited spaces to develop competencies crucial for active participation (UNICEF, n.d.-b).

Power relations are transformed when women and girls exercise agency and take action, through expanded access to and control over resources and changes to the institutional structures that ultimately shape their lives and futures. These three elements—agency, institutional structures, and resources—are key to women's and girls' empowerment (Gates Foundation 2017).

Growing evidence underscores the potential transformative impact of safe spaces where girls can develop knowledge, skills, beliefs, and relationships that support their agency. Participation in activities in safe space can expose women and girls to new information and opportunities for participation and learning that may facilitate broader understanding, curiosity, and motivation for change. Safe spaces have been shown to help women and girls access needed services and build social networks, among other vital activities (UNFPA 2021). Indeed, the impact of safe spaces has been found to go beyond the individual level to positively shift social and gender dynamics within families and in the broader community. Safe spaces can also help form the basis for gender-transformative outcomes at the individual, interpersonal, and community levels.

Growing evidence underscores the potential transformative impact of safe spaces where girls can develop knowledge, skills, beliefs, and relationships that support their agency.

Evidence suggests, for example, that mobilizing or collectivizing women to create not just safe but also dialogic space is crucial to dismantling gender inequality. Dialogic spaces are those that are formed as a result of strategic mobilizing for engaging in discussions, planning, conversations, and critical debate in a manner that nurtures trust and solidarity, which can lead to sustained collective action geared toward structural change and social transformation (TISS 2022).

This brief seeks to deepen our understanding of the characteristics of what we refer to as gender-transformative safe spaces (GTSS) for adolescent girls in marginalized communities, exploring their role in strengthening girls' agency within the particular context of southern India and exploring when and how collectivized safe spaces can become spaces for learning, sharing, and celebrating (TISS 2022).

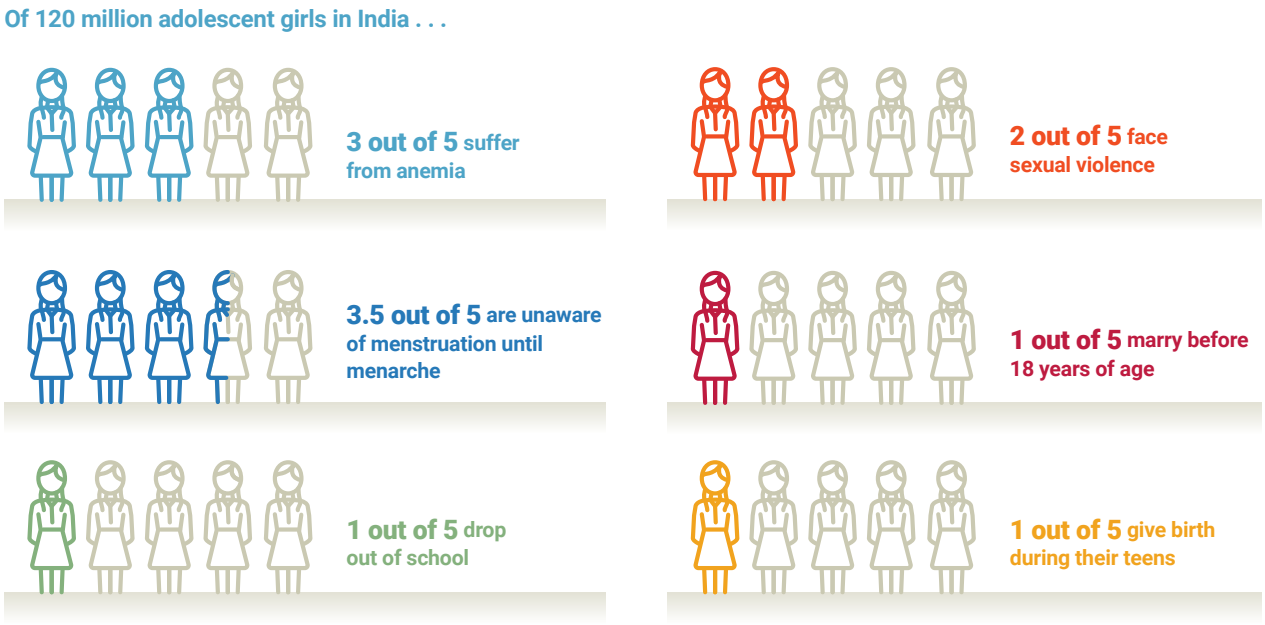
II. Status of adolescent girls in India

Life for adolescent girls in India is fraught with challenges and vulnerabilities (see Figure 1). The onset of puberty is a major event in the lives of girls, yet data show that girls are often ill-informed about this crucial phase in their life. Almost three-quarters (71%) of girls report having no knowledge of menstruation before their first period (UNICEF, n.d.-a), and 23 million girls drop out of school annually because of the lack of proper menstrual hygiene facilities (UNESCO 2023). A 2018 report suggests that 39.4% of girls 15–18 years old are out of school (NCPCR); more recent data show that 57% of girls leave school upon reaching the 11th grade (CARE India 2021). Not being in school is closely linked with early marriage and pregnancy (Birchall, 2018); one out of four (26.8%) of 20- to 24-year-old women marry before the age of 18, and 7.9% of girls aged 15–19 are already mothers (NFHS 4). Adolescent girls are often malnourished, leading to significant dangers for the life of mother and child in the case of early pregnancy, and also increasing the likelihood of producing malnourished children (Nguyen et al. 2017). A high number of adolescent girls in India suffer from anemia, for example, which has been associated with poor maternal and birth outcomes, including premature birth, low birth weight and maternal mortality (World Health Organization 2023). Furthermore, many girls who drop out of school are likely engaged in care work or household responsibilities; adolescent girls work as many as 120–150% more hours than boys in Indian households (Claver 2023).

2.1 INTERGENERATIONAL GENDER OPPRESSION

Even with existing laws that prevent the marriage of a girl under 18 years old, child marriage is a deeply ingrained social norm that continues to persist. With an estimated 1.5 million girls under 18 entering marriage each year, India holds the unfortunate distinction of having the highest number of child brides globally (UNICEF 2023b).

FIGURE 1. Status of adolescent girls in India



Source: Author's conceptualization with data from Chakrabarty et al. (2023), Ayyub (2016), Sinha (2012), and UNFPA (2022).

Early marriage is likely to restrict both girls and boys from exercising their agency, including making critical life choices and enjoying fundamental freedoms. These restrictions hinder their ability to pursue educational opportunities, achieve sustainable livelihoods, and access sexual and reproductive health rights.

Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to remain in school (UNICEF 2023a). They have worse economic and health outcomes than their unmarried peers, which are eventually passed down to their own children, straining the country's capacity to provide quality health and education services (UNICEF 2023a). Girls who become pregnant as adolescents are at a higher risk of maternal and newborn disease and death (World Health Organization 2024), and children born to young mothers are disadvantaged in childhood nutrition and schooling (Fall et al. 2015).

The chain of events associated with child marriage forms a sort of "cycle of denial": adolescent girls are denied their rights to education and a healthy and a safe future. Without access to these enabling rights, they face negative life outcomes that are likely to weaken their agency and perpetuate gender oppression to the next generation. Girls who are not in school are more likely to be married, and once married, a girl's world narrows dramatically. Child brides may experience isolation from their family, friends, and communities, as well as violence, abuse, and exploitation. Girls who marry early often become pregnant while they are still children themselves, with great risks for their own well-being and that of their babies.[1]

Early marriage is likely to restrict both girls and boys from exercising their agency, including making critical life choices and enjoying fundamental freedoms. These restrictions hinder their ability to pursue educational opportunities, achieve sustainable livelihoods, and access sexual and reproductive health rights (Nirantar Trust 2014). Early marriage also perpetuates patriarchy and gender inequality, and it is likely that the effects of this are intergenerational (Cader 2017).

2.2 WHAT CAN BREAK THIS "CYCLE OF DENIAL"?

The concept of "safe space" has received much traction in work on girls' empowerment, especially when the dynamics within that space enable dialogue, conversation, and critical thinking that are crucial to propel change (TISS 2022; see Appendix D).

The research undertaken for this policy brief seeks to understand the role that safe spaces play in unleashing girls' agency. The research first looks at the unique socio-cultural barriers faced by girls in South India and provides evidence-based insights into targeted interventions that aim to create the conditions to empower girls to take charge of their lives. There currently exists a gap in understanding the aspirations and needs of marginal-ized girls, the challenges they face, and the knowledge and skills they require to navigate adolescence. At the same time, there is a need to understand the role played by ecosystem players like parents, educational institutions, teachers, and civil society organizations (CSOs) in supporting them. This policy brief will help advance understanding while also providing insights into the creation of safe spaces for adolescent girls in South India.

1. See, for example, "What Pregnancy and Childbirth Do to the Bodies of Young Girls" (Nolen 2022).

III. A brief note on methods

This study explores the complex web of socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors that contribute to limiting the agency of adolescent girls in southern India and the role and characteristics of spaces within which they can strengthen their agency. The research questions were the following:

1. What are the socio-economic and cultural norms and barriers that adolescent girls in South India face that weaken their agency and ability to negotiate better life outcomes for themselves?
2. How can "safe spaces" strengthen the agency of adolescent girls in South India?

To answer these questions, we used a mixed methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from adolescent girls, their parents, educators, and members of CSOs in July and August 2023. Data were collected in part through a structured questionnaire that sought to understand their knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions related to education, marriage, sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence (GBV), and their rights. The respondents were 1,681 adolescent girls, none of whom had ever taken part in any girls' empowerment program at the time they answered the questionnaire.

To understand experiences in girls' empowerment programs, qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with two cohorts of girls studying in government-funded public residential schools—one group aged 12 to 15 and the other 16 to 18—participating in the VOICE 4 Girls program, a national-level nongovernmental organization (NGO) in India that holds that given the right information and skills, girls can advocate to stay in school, delay marriage and pregnancy, keep themselves healthy, and increase their economic potential. More about the organization can be found in Appendix A.

To better understand the ecosystem around girls, interviews were also conducted with parents and educators. See Appendix C for more details. However, this policy brief centers the voices of girls, using data from parents and educators only when it was deemed relevant. See Appendix B for more details on the complete methodology.

IV. What did we learn?

4.1 ECOSYSTEM BARRIERS FACED BY ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The research showed that girls are socialized from an early age to gender roles that reflect patriarchal norms. The girls shared that as early as three or four years they realized that as a "girl" the world is different. Helping their mother in the kitchen or cleaning the courtyard or even taking care of their younger siblings were all responsibilities girls donned from before the age of puberty. They spoke of many restrictions on what they could do, whom they could play with, and where they could go without supervision. Girls said that they were not allowed to play in the evening for as long as they wanted because they had chores to do. As one girl asked, "I want to play late into the evening like my brother; why should I be the only one asked to help at home?"

The internalization of patriarchal norms was reflected in the survey responses of the parents and girls who felt that they had to conform to these norms. Even if parents, who themselves are subject to societal pressures, wanted to break free, they reported feeling powerless. As one parent shared, "I would like for my daughter to wear what she wants, but the neighbors and community will label her as a 'forward' girl and that may impact her ability to get a 'good' marriage proposal."

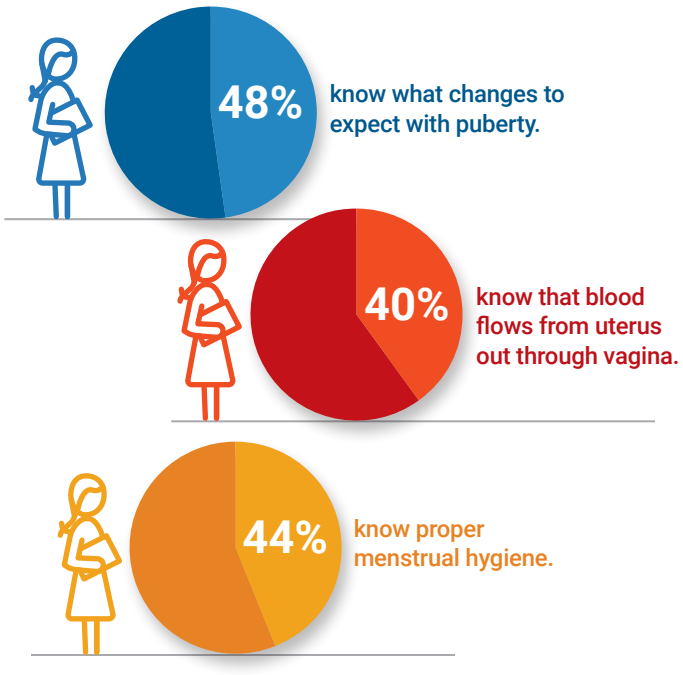
4.1.1 Puberty increases societal pressures on girls

Puberty heightens the socialization girls faced and, in many instances, girls described how their world further shrunk as they reached adolescence. Whether it is everyday decisions like what to wear or whom they can hang out with, life decisions like what they can study, what career choices are "appropriate" for women, and who or when to marry, the girls in this study reported that most of these decisions were made by parents and extended family. In the FGDs, girls and parents spoke of gender discrimination in education, mobility, and access to resources, all of which can suppress girls' agency to pursue their goals, needs, and desires without fear of retribution from immediate and extended family as well as the community.

Given that puberty leads to menstruation, the research also wanted to capture the knowledge the girls had about menstruation and menstrual hygiene. Previous research has found that menstruation is often surrounded by taboos and myths that not only exclude women from many aspects of socio-cultural life, but also impact girls' and women's emotional state, lifestyle, and, most importantly, physical health. Cultural norms and religious taboos are often compounded by traditional associations with evil spirits, shame, and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction (Kaiser n.d.). Low knowledge levels and understandings of puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health (Garg & Anand 2015) make it challenging for girls and women to address these taboos and beliefs.

Our survey results (see Figure 2) clearly show that girls do not get reliable information about menstruation. Indeed, one out of every five girls stated that they believed that menstruation happens to girls because it is "god's will." Most (80%) girls also reported that menstruation cleans the body of "dirty" blood, and hence they agreed that they would defile places of worship and that girls should be allowed to fully participate in the household only when they have finished their period cycle.

FIGURE 2. Awareness about menstruation among adolescent girls surveyed



Ideas around menstruation were closely linked to patriarchal norms. For example, girls pointed to the idea that girls who attain menstruation are **"ready" for marriage**. One girl shared, "In my village, three girls were married off as soon as they hit menarche." Indeed, many girls mentioned that the restrictions placed on them after menarche came about because their families and the community fear that girls will fall in love and elope, which put a lot of pressure on them from their families to behave in a certain way. All of the girls surveyed knew at least one girl in their village who dropped out of school when she started menstruating. In all of the cases, the girls who dropped out were married off before 18 years of age. Many girls in the FGD shared examples of girls in their community who were victims of early marriage and also teenage mothers; they also mentioned that this weakened the ability of these girls to stand up to the violence and abuse that they may face in their marital homes.

Through the FGDs with girls and parents it became evident that the retention of girls in the educational system after the girls began menstruating was very tenuous, with constant pressures for the girls to marry before the legal-age.

Girls surveyed also reported that they faced and witnessed gender-based violence (GBV) in their communities; indeed, half of the nearly 1,700 girls surveyed reported that a man could slap a woman if she disagreed with him. See Appendix E for a detailed description of girls' unspoken fears, that is, understanding gender-based violence and their insecurities.

4.1.2 Socio-economic barriers to education push girls into early marriage

In India, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009 means that every child has a right to full-time, equitable, quality elementary education.[2] The government must guarantee compulsory and free education for children in publicly funded government schools until 14 years of age. Yet at least 1.6 million girls in India remain out of school, with girls' participation in secondary and higher secondary education an area of grave concern.

While national-level data linking school dropout numbers and early marriage are missing, the girls in this study spoke of the ways in which social and economic pressures push girls out of school, which could be one of the reasons for the high incidence of early marriages. It was heartening to see that many girls in this study had dreams and aspirations to pursue higher education and careers: 85% of the girls surveyed reported wanting to study after 10th grade. However, about 70% did not know how to pursue higher education and achieve their goals. Lacking information on education, the girls reported often giving in to the demands of their families.

Girls expressed that families are supporting girls to study until 10th grade, but in many instances, it stops there. Discrimination and societal pressures often discourage girls from pursuing higher education. One girl shared, "There is a perception that if boys receive education, they will work hard and support their parents. However, with girls, they will get married and leave, so why bother educating them? Let them get married." Another said that her parents had already told her that they did not have money so they would only support her to finish higher secondary. She was also quite dejected that her parents would, however, continue to support her brother to pursue higher education. In this case, as is true for many girls from socio-economically marginalized communities, the family prioritizes educating the boys. As one parent stated:

> *Even though both boys and girls are sent to school in our community, some people in villages still believe that girls don't really need education. . . . Some families prefer to get their daughters married early instead.*

Many girls in the focus group discussions shared examples of girls in their community who were victims of early marriage and also teenage mothers; they also mentioned that this weakened the ability of these girls to stand up to the violence and abuse that they may face in their marital homes.

2. Ministry of Education (2019).

Many other girls reported . . . that the family decided what jobs are "right" for a girl and that girls must follow the family's wishes if they want to pursue a career. Some parents said they believe that girls cannot voice their opinions regarding what they study or whom they marry.

The pressures of a "good" marriage hang over the heads of these girls. One girl explained, "Even though we are in school, there is so much pressure on performing well because if girls do not graduate high school, they would be married off." Many parents feel that girls have a bigger responsibility and marriage is the solution to protect them, as they strongly believe that girls could not be on their own and they need a husband who could provide protection.

Note that as of 2006, India enacted the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, which clearly prohibits child marriage, protects and provides relief to victims, and enhances punishment for those who abet, promote, or solemnize such marriage. Yet nearly two decades later, 71% of the girls surveyed for this research had no knowledge of the Act and did not know that it was illegal for girls under 18 years old to get married.

4.2 IDENTITY AND AGENCY OF GIRLS

As defined above, "agency" refers to the capacity to take purposeful action and pursue goals (Gates Foundation 2017), yet the girls in this study spoke of agency constrained by gendered norms, socio-culturally accepted behaviors, limited mobility, and reduced access to resources.

Girls expressed frustration about the ways in which gendered expectations within their families and communities influenced their ability to make decisions, from what to wear to what career they could pursue.

> *My parents do not let me dress the way I like, and they don't allow us to wear jeans and t-shirts. Also, the neighbors badmouth us when we do not dress up traditionally, wear salwar-dupatta.*
>
> *In my community a girl wanted to join the police, but she was stopped [by people], saying it is a job that only boys should take up. She now has a job at D-Mart (a common supermarket in India).*

Many other girls reported the same experiences from their lives where they recognized **that the family decided what jobs are "right" for a girl and that girls must follow the family's wishes if they want to pursue a career.** Some parents we spoke with also said that they believe that girls cannot voice their opinions regarding what they study or whom they marry.

Girls reported that they have reduced access to resources and opportunities to pursue their aspirations. None of the girls surveyed reported having access to cycles or "bikes," a motorized two-wheeler, and many stated they did not have access to a cellular phone. With limitations in mobility and access to technology, girls felt it would be difficult for them to research their next steps for their careers or to commute to their places of work. However, when we asked the parents why they would not provide girls with this access, many parents shared the concern that society determines the right decorum for the girls, and hence they impose restrictions to keep their girls safe. One girl even mentioned, "Boys don't bring bad name to the family, but as a girl I make one mistake then I bring a bad name to my family."

In sum, both girls and parents spoke of gender discrimination in education, mobility, and access to resources, all of which can **suppress girls' agency to pursue their goals, needs, and desires** (Gates Foundation 2017). This is evident in the way girls imagined and expressed their future. Many foresaw a future where they drop out of school, help with housework, and get married at the "right" age as decided by the family, to a groom chosen by the family. This was reflected in the survey as well, with 42% of girls stating that there is no use for girls to stay in school after turning 16, and 42% maintaining that only a man can decide how to spend the family money.

4.3 LACK OF SAFE SPACES

From our visit to the schools and communities, discussions with girls and parents, and surveys, it was very clear that girls do not get structured and reliable information about critical topics like sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence, rights, or future planning and have no access to dialogic spaces for discussions around their anxieties and fears about their futures.

In our focus groups with girls who had not been exposed to any girls' empowerment program, the conversation swayed from being hopeful and full of dreams and desires for their futures to moments of disappointment, dejection, and helplessness about the realities they could face. As described above, most girls described feeling that they had little agency to participate in their futures, especially in decisions around their education, marriage, and career choices.

Fully 100% of the girls mentioned feeling that they lack safe spaces in their families, communities, and schools where they could be given critical information and knowledge. They stated that such spaces would help them talk about topics openly without fear of judgment or retribution. As one girl shared in the FGD, "If we approach some teachers with questions, this might lead to them scolding us, questioning why we are raising these topics at this time, and instructing us to focus on our studies instead. In some cases they threaten to tell our parents that we are saying 'shameful' things."

They also felt that in such spaces girls could support each other and have access to information that would help them become decisionmakers in their lives and plan their futures. One girl said, "I forget my problems when I share them with my two close friends. I want to meet more girls my age and make friends!" They described the support system as one that could nourish girls like themselves and at the same time be a space where they could meet role models to look up to.

The second research question sought to explore this specific question: "What if there was a safe space?"

V. What girls say about safe spaces:
Levers to help overcome socio-cultural barriers?

To understand how safe spaces might help girls negotiate these ecosystem barriers and strengthen their agency, this research looked at the experiences of girls participating in VOICE 4 Girls, a nonprofit in India that seeks to support socio-economically marginalized adolescent girls to re-imagine their identities, capabilities, and futures (see Text Box 1). Since 2011, VOICE 4 Girls has worked with 300,000 adolescent girls and boys, as well as 6,000 young women and men, with the overarching mission of fostering a gender-equitable world.

5.1 THE VOICE 4 GIRLS MODEL

The VOICE 4 Girls model recognizes that young people, including adolescents, have a body of experience unique to their situation, and that they have views and ideas that derive from this experience. They are social actors with skills and capacities to bring about constructive resolutions to their own problems. It is therefore important that they have a platform such as a "safe space"[3] to share these views and ideas and work together to achieve them.

Between 2017 and 2019, VOICE 4 Girls tracked a selected cohort of 516 girls to understand their aspirations and application of knowledge and skills they learned in VOICE in their daily lives. Most of the girls reported overcoming challenges in convincing parents to let them continue in higher education (86%), but fewer successfully negotiated delaying marriage (22%). Notably, 92% of the girls have shared program information with their networks, leading to positive health outcomes, improved recognition of gender-based discrimination and violence (83%), and observable

TEXT BOX 1. Creating safe and dialogic spaces through a feminist framework for social change

Example: VOICE4GIRLS

In the Voice4Girls camp, in which 1,200 students participated during the project's first quarter, the organization's journal entry referred to discussion on gender equality and gender roles within the family. A similar camp organized in the second quarter incorporated information on sexual and reproductive health, mental health, gender identity and sexuality. The journal reflected a change in the young girls' confidence, from talking about aspirations of financial independence in the first quarter to showing willingness to negotiate with family and overcome challenges (gaining autonomy, respect and control over their bodies) in later quarters. Girls were also interested in learning more about the LGBT community after they came to understand the difference between sex and gender during the camps.

Source: K. Watson. n.d. Summary Report: Mapping Incremental Change in a Complex Society, American Jewish World Service, https://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/AJWS-TISS-Report-Summary_final1.pdf"https://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/AJWS-TISS-Report-Summary_final1.pdf.

3. Adolescent safe spaces are spaces where adolescents, boys or girls, can share their views, share experiences, and explore solutions without fear of being judged, ignored, or disrespected. Many agencies such as UNICEF, Mercy Corps, Population Council, and the like, also define and use "safe spaces" to mobilize adolescents, design and deliver programming, and provide a platform for collective action. See Appendix D for more details.

positive behavioral shifts in their families. These shifts range from dispelling menstrual myths to promoting gender equality in household chores. The program's broader impact highlights how girls become active agents of positive change, making decisions related to their education and futures.

5.2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE SAFE SPACES (GTSS) AT VOICE 4 GIRLS

VOICE 4 Girls aims to create GTSS through four key principles:

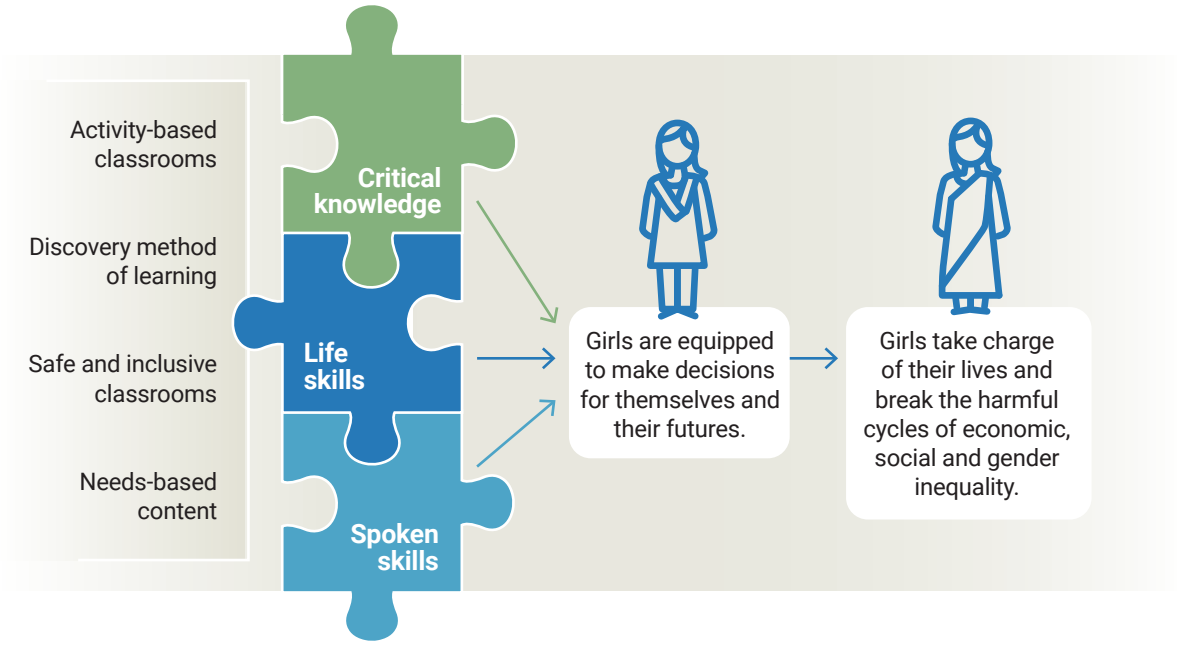
1. **Nonhierarchical structure:** The VOICE classroom is intentionally designed to ensure that every individual is treated with equality and respect.
2. **Girl-to-girl approach:** The VOICE curriculum is delivered by young women, often college students, who establish a nurturing relationship akin to older sisters with the girls. This peerlike interaction encourages an atmosphere of trust and openness, enabling girls to confide in and seek support from their trainers.
3. **Diverse representation:** The curriculum incorporates stories of real-life girls to invoke a sense of belonging and inspire girls to believe in their ability to succeed. Additionally, the curriculum features narratives of girls from various backgrounds and promotes the use of gender-neutral language to break gender stereotypes.
4. **Positive language:** Trainers encourage critical thinking by asking questions and suggesting alternatives that support adolescents in recognizing their strengths and guide them in areas of improvement.

The curriculum is further framed around a larger narrative of feminist leadership. VOICE believes that agency is critical to the girls' lives, and this is reflected in their mantra, "When a girl finds her voice, the world around her begins to change."

VOICE 4 Girls has designed 240 hours of gender-transformative curriculum for girls, 160 hours tailored for boys, and an additional 40 hours dedicated to teachers. All programs work with difficult-to-reach and socio-economically marginalized adolescents in publicly funded schools. The organization creates GTSS in these schools because these spaces represent the point-of-entry to enable the introduction of information, knowledge, and life skills to girls. These school-based spaces allow girls to understand the constructs of gender and patriarchy and discover mechanisms to dismantle these structures, as seen in Figure 3.

The girls who complete an initial one-year program then become peer leaders, or Sakhis. With support from the organization, these adolescent peer leaders create their own GTSS—referred to as Sakhi Clubs—in their schools and communities and facilitate sessions with other girls to share information and

FIGURE 3. Components of the GTSS as implemented by VOICE 4 Girls



knowledge and build support and solidarity. Seeking to improve conditions across ecosystems for adolescent girls, in addition to working directly with girls and boys, VOICE collaborates with teachers and engages parents to become allies. These allies continue to promote and support the leadership provided by these peer leaders.

5.3 WHAT GIRLS GAIN IN GTSS: KNOWLEDGE, AGENCY, AND SOLIDARITY

VOICE 4 Girls programs are led in a "girl-for-girl" approach, where young men and women who are pursuing their undergraduate and graduate education are recruited and trained intensively to impart the curriculum in publicly funded and affordable private schools. The program aims to help adolescents acquire critical knowledge around gender, health and hygiene, rights, safety from violence, and future planning, which is deeply intertwined with life skills like critical thinking, problem solving, decisionmaking, negotiation, and leadership. Girls surveyed after participating in VOICE 4 Girls programs for a year described their experiences and the impact of the program in three key areas: (1) information and knowledge, (2) voice and agency, and (3) support and solidarity (see Figure 4).

5.3.1 Information and knowledge

The girls in this study noted that VOICE 4 Girls programs have raised their awareness of the challenges faced by girls in society. They said they are now better informed about issues such as gender inequality, violence, and the importance of fundamental rights. This awareness has empowered them to navigate these challenges and advocate for their rights and those of their communities. One girl shared, "Before attending the VOICE sessions, I did not know the kind of problems girls face in the society and that girls like me drop out and marry early. At VOICE, I learned about the physical and emotional changes that my body will go through and how to negotiate with family and the community." The girls who came to the VOICE programs then became the voices of girls in their schools and communities.

5.3.2 Voice and agency

Internal evaluation data from VOICE show that the percentage of girls who felt confident that their opinions related to their health, education, or marriage would be considered in their families rose by 21 percentage points after participating in VOICE programs (49% to 70%). They also reported that they were no longer hesitant to express themselves, whether through public speaking, participation in competitions, or addressing important issues within their families.

One girl shared the following story that encapsulates the profound agency and empowerment that can emerge from education and awareness created in GTSS:

> *When my sister faced irregular periods, I shared my knowledge with my mother. I explained that a typical menstrual cycle lasts between 21 and 35 days, and any delays should*

FIGURE 4. Impact of VOICE programs as described by participants

The girls expressed that the problem-solving skills they learned through VOICE camps helped them get to the root of the issues that the girls in their community face, find stakeholders, and mobilize resources to find solutions.

prompt a medical check-up. I convinced my mother to take my sister to a gynecologist who diagnosed polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). I now assist my sister in maintaining proper diet. My mother is very proud of me!

By leveraging her knowledge about menstrual health, this girl broke societal taboos surrounding discussions of periods and took proactive steps to support her sister. Her initiative in convincing her family to seek medical help demonstrates her critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. This act not only fostered her sister's health and well-being but also deepened her mother's pride, highlighting the transformative impact of informed communication. In these ways, girls are taking charge of their lives, fostering a culture of openness, and shifting the perceptions of their families toward them.

Data and examples shared by the girls during this research point to the fact that girls have become agents of change within their communities as well. The girls expressed that the problem-solving skills they learned through VOICE camps helped them get to the root of the issues that the girls in their community face, find stakeholders, and mobilize resources to find solutions. One girl said, "We have gained the confidence to tackle problems, navigate challenges, and address instances of harassment. We now possess the knowledge and assurance to effectively handle such situations and interact with others while on the road."

5.3.3 Solidarity and support

The girls also spoke about their knowledge and experiences with others, encouraging friends and family to adopt healthier practices and to stand up for their rights. One girl shared:

I was able to stop a child marriage. There is a girl called Prema in my neighborhood. She is studying higher secondary education, her parents thought of getting their child married. I along with my sister tried explaining the complication of child marriage to her mother, but she shouted at us saying that we are small kids, and we don't know anything. Later we took the help of my mother and spoke to her mother and delayed the marriage.

Another girl shared:

I found my voice when I stood up for my friend who was being harassed by boys. I did not have the confidence to stand up for myself when I experienced this earlier, and only after VOICE camps did I understand how to recognize this harassment as violence. By standing up for my friend and reaching out to the elders in my community, I made my village realize the troubles girls went through and helped stop the harassment. I mobilized girls in my village to have the village council install streetlamps.

This example serves to demonstrate how girls are exercising agency not just in their own lives but also in solidarity with other girls and women in their communities.

Understanding these girls' experiences and development sheds light on the aspects of GTSS that girls most value as well as on the relationship between these. Girls told stories of how the knowledge and skills they gained in VOICE 4 Girls programs helped them find their voice and assert their rights to better nav-igate patriarchal norms, pressures from the family, and other ecosystem barriers, which shows how they have increased agency to make or influence decisions about their futures. Moreover, the girls' experience of discovering support and solidarity through the GTSS created in the VOICE classroom went beyond the four walls. As adolescent peer leaders, they recreated the GTSS in their communities and brought a larger group of adolescent girls under their wings.

VI. Recommendations

It is imperative for India to recognize the importance of invest-ing in adolescent girls to continue its rise to be a superpower and an important player in the Global South. The findings of this policy brief show both the criticality of the lives of adolescent girls and the possibilities they can bring about when interven-tions advance girls' agency through gender-equality programs. It is highly recommended that adolescent policy and programming be designed and developed with the objective of expansion of knowledge, choices, resources, opportunities, and voices for socio-economically marginalized adolescent girls in India, who can then seek better opportunities for themselves and other women of their communities, and ultimately break intergenerational oppression.

The principal recommendation that emerged from this research is the need to foster GTSS in schools and community centers. As the principal public policy mechanism for the development of young people, publicly funded government schools are a critical entry point to large-scale adolescent programming. The policy should address the critical gaps that were revealed by the research presented here, and hence it should be devel-oped around these areas: (1) a girls' leadership program with life skills and critical topics around SRHR, gender-based violence (GBV), careers and futures, and rights and self-awareness; (2) a young mentor-to-girl approach so that girls open up, receive, and respond to information in a safe space that creates role modeling of peer-to-peer social networks; and (3) a place where adolescent girls are encouraged to use their voice to negotiate for their future as well as the future for other girls and women in their communities.

A multisectoral collaborative approach should be adopted to effectively develop, manage, and implement policy and practice designed to strengthen adolescent girls' agency, as well as community awareness campaigns (see Table 1). A strong commitment is essential from different actors (mentioned above) to create and sustain GTSS. While mentor-led and peer-led programs are highly successful, these programs require considerable resources and support to stay active and effective. A nodal agency should be created that draws from different stakeholder groups for effective design, delivery, and accountability. Some roles that the stakeholders should play are:

1. **Government (G):** The Ministries of Education, Social Welfare, Tribal Welfare, Backward Classes Welfare, and others that have access to the most marginalized adolescent girls and hence interventions in educational institutions or community centers must commit to the creation of safe spaces. They must allocate resources to design adolescent programs and mobilize girls to attend these programs.

2. **Educational institution (EI):** For millions of vulnerable girls, government-funded public schools are the only spaces where they are getting an education. These schools can then become the site for work and an entry point for the implementation of policies and practices aimed at strengthening adolescent girls' agency. At the same time, teachers can be mobilized to foster gender-equitable classrooms and create an adolescent-friendly culture that can help girls feel safe and included in schools. Enabling teachers and gender ambassadors is important to creating this ecosystem of support.

3. **College (C):** For a young mentor-led approach, undergraduate and graduate colleges can be approached for support. Through structured internships directly with the college or through the compulsory student programs like National Service Scheme (A Central Sector Scheme of Government of India, Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports) and National Cadet Corps (the youth wing of the Indian Armed Forces), college students could be mobilized to serves as mentors and educate adolescent girls.

4. **Civil society organization (CSO):** NGOs and other partners could provide technical support like curriculum design, monitoring, and coordination. CSOs could also be mobilized to support with resources like funding, technology, and logistics.

5. **Families:** As seen in this research, parents also face socio-cultural barriers. Awareness, educational sessions, and even SRHR awareness among mothers can go a long way in completing the ecosystem of support that can enable girls' empowerment and agency. CSOs and governments must work together for this awareness.

6. **Girls:** Adolescent girls have the power to transform their lives and those of their families and communities. Young women and girl peer leaders can be a powerful force not just to spread awareness but also to become role models, mentors, and champions of girls' agency. Programs must have a component that supports girls to become leaders and change agents in their communities.

TABLE 1. Recommendations for creating interventions for girls' agency

WHAT	DETAILS	WHO
Gender-transformative safe spaces (GTSS)	Physical spaces must be created in schools and community centers to conduct adolescent-friendly programming.	**G**—Access to schools, resources, and administrative support. **EI**—Mobilize girls, provide safe spaces, parental support, and host trainers. **C**—Social internships to young college students. **CSO**—Innovative curricula, training, and pedagogy management support and quality control.
Gender training for teachers	Teachers are great resources for students if they can be trained to create safe spaces for adolescents.	**G**—Government teachers have in-training programs mandating gender training for teachers in the annual training calendar. **CSO**—Coordinating with the various departments, pedagogy, curriculum, training and M&E.
Parent and community outreach	Parents can become strong advocates and champions of girls. Adolescent peer leaders can be engaged to spread awareness about menstrual health and hygiene, gender-based violence (GBV) and rights of girls and women. However, this endeavor must be backed by services that address the health and educational needs and aspirations for girls.	**G**—Provide guidelines to local Gram Panchayats to conduct awareness campaigns to promote gender equality. **CSO**—Develop interactive community engagement campaigns. **EI**—Schools promote parent engagement and conduct good parenting programs.
Awareness campaigns on laws related to safety and security of women	Campaigns to spread information about POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) Act, PWDVA (Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005), RTE (Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009), Prevention of Early Marriage, etc., must be delivered to girls directly as well as through campaigns into the community. At the same time, efforts must be made to strengthen the implementation of these laws.	**G**—Activate the relevant departments to conduct awareness campaigns around POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) Act, PWDVA (Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005), Cyber safety etc. **CSO**—Develop interactive community engagement campaigns.
Future planning hub	Schools must have a hub that helps girls to plan their professional futures. Career counselling, technical skills training and soft-skills training is important to focus on so girls do not drop off because of lack of knowledge about higher education and employment opportunities. Physical or virtual hubs can be created in schools and communities to provide these services.	**G**—Create physical and virtual future planning hubs. **EI**—Connect community connect and maintain the schedule in schools. **C**—College students can mentoring support to girls. **CSO**—Build interactive materials and program management support.
Gender programming for boys	A comprehensive SRHR curriculum, including gender equality and rights. This can be delivered through schools as well as youth clubs.	**G**—Approve and allocate resources for rolling out a gender equality program for boys. **EI**—Commit to conducting sessions for children. **C**—College students can provide mentoring support to girls. **CSO**—Build interactive materials and program management support.
Gender data	Evidence-based representative data collection is needed. These data must be specific to adolescent girls and decoupled from women. A national- and state-level database on adolescents must be maintained with a specific focus on SRHR, aspirations, and challenges.	**CSO**—Share evidence collected with other partners and organizations working with adolescent girls. Also, coordinate to share with policymakers for effective policymaking.

VII. Conclusion

"When a girl finds her voice, the world around her begins to change" is the mantra of VOICE 4 Girls. Adolescent girls have the incredible power to exercise their agency not only for themselves but also for other girls in their communities. This policy brief has highlighted both the ecosystem barriers that trap girls in a "cycle of denial" and the potential of GTSS to support girls in breaking this cycle by strengthening their agency and unleashing their potential to shape their futures. The influence of the work done in GTSS helps girls build feminist solidarity and networks that they can use to support each other as well as girls and women in their communities. These spaces create dialogic spaces that help girls deconstruct the gender and patriarchy even as they develop critical perspectives for transformation.

It is imperative to support these girls by providing GTSS, developing adolescent-focused policies and programs centering their needs and aspirations, and galvanizing the momentum gained by creating a leadership channel for these girl leaders. Maheshwari, a former VOICE camper, says it best: "What girls need is a safe platform to learn things about 'life.' Once they do, nothing can stop us!" Maheshwari was a VOICE camper and peer leader who saved her own sister from a child marriage, encouraged her sister to pursue studies, pursued a diploma herself, and is now a committed trainer at VOICE camps where she trains many adolescent girls to become the next generation of leaders and gender ambassadors. She and other adolescent girls like her are the wings of change that can transform India.

"When a girl finds her voice, the world around her begins to change". . . . Adolescent girls have the incredible power to exercise their agency not only for themselves but also for other girls in their communities.

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APPENDIX A
About VOICE 4 Girls

VOICE 4 Girls believes that given the right information and skills, girls can advocate to stay in school, delay marriage and pregnancy, keep themselves healthy, and increase their economic potential. Adolescents emerge from VOICE programs with a set of practical skills and knowledge, and the confidence to advocate for themselves and their futures.

Established in 2012, VOICE 4 Girls is an NGO that works with marginalized adolescent girls in India to re-imagine their identities, capabilities, and futures. Through various adolescent focused leadership curricula, the mission of the organization is carried out through residential and day camps where adolescents are introduced to the critical knowledge and life skills. VOICE has implemented programs in nine states of India: Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Tripura, and Jharkhand. VOICE 4 Girls has reached out to a quarter of a million adolescents through its various programs.

HER VOICE PROGRAM

As VOICE's flagship program, Her VOICE is a unique two-year empowerment program for adolescent girls from age 11 onwards. The Her VOICE curriculum is set in the framework of feminist leadership and thus focuses on critical knowledge required by adolescents to understand adolescence and the challenges that come with it and to strengthen their agency. VOICE curriculum aims to help marginalized adolescent girls and boys to become informed decisionmakers so they can reach their full potential by providing access to relevant and credible information. VOICE's mission is to enable adolescents and young women to become self-determined adolescents who are aware of their identity and understand their needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

The Her VOICE Program for adolescent girls comprises three camps: Parichay, Disha, and Sakhi. Each module is 10 days long and is conducted for girls of classes 8 and 9 (See Figure A.1).

Her VOICE Parichay

- The first module of the Her VOICE Program is where girls learn about puberty, menstrual health, basic rights, and safety from violence.
- Girls are also encouraged to introspect standards of strength, beauty, and gender as dictated by culture and society.
- The 10-day activity-based camp is packed with fun-filled energizers and activities; girls leave the camp feeling more confident about themselves.

Her VOICE Disha

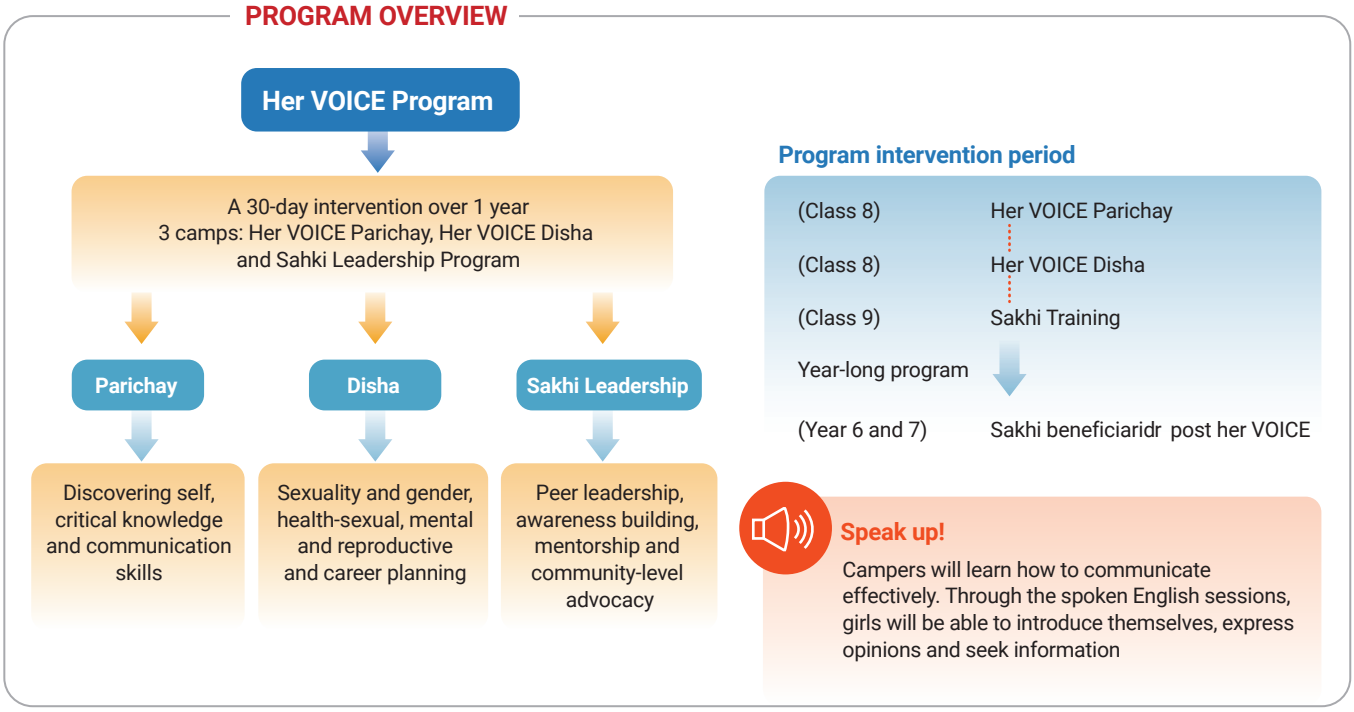
- The second module of the Her VOICE Program engages the campers with topics such as education, future planning, gender and sexuality, consequences of early marriage and pregnancy, nutrition, mental health, and sexual and reproductive health over 10 days.
- During this camp, girls start to learn various skills pertaining to negotiation and planning, and they also are introduced to the idea of girls and women leaders in their communities.

Sakhi Peer leadership

- Attended by the girls who have completed Parichay and Disha camps, Sakhi camp enables the girls to become peer leaders, educators, and mentors.
- They are trained in leadership skills and are well equipped to teach younger girls in their school and communities about topics such as importance of education, safe and unsafe touch, support system, and basic health and well- being.
- By the end of Sakhi training, the adolescents are well equipped to reach out in their respective communities. A domino effect is created leading to maximized impact.

Beyond the dissemination of knowledge, the initiative has established 6,000 GTSS, resulting in a 60% increase in participants' knowledge across vital areas such as menstrual health,

FIGURE A.1. Voice 4 Girls—Her Voice Program Overview.



hygiene, violence, rights, careers, and future planning. In tandem with knowledge enhancement, the program has achieved a 65% shift in attitudes among adolescent girls, fostering gender-equitable perspectives. This attitudinal transformation is complemented by increased community and school participation, with program participants actively supporting their peers, cultivating a heightened sense of responsibility. The formation of 30,000 Sakhi groups within communities stands as a testament to the program's impact, creating a robust sisterhood that promotes mutual support and empowerment for other girls. Through the Sakhi Clubs, an additional 5,000 GTSS were created in schools and communities.

APPENDIX B
Methodology

A mixed-methods study was used to address the critical issues that affect the lives of adolescent girls. The study included both quantitative and qualitative data collected from adolescent girls, parents, educators, CSOs, and policymakers.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The quantitative data were collected from girls prior to commencing a VOICE 4 Girls program. These girls were from the publicly funded government schools of Telangana, India, studying in high school (7th, 8th, and 9th grades). The structured questionnaire consists of three sections (1) demographics, (2) subject knowledge, and (3) perceptions. The data were collected from a sample of 1,681 girls. The girls were randomly selected from every class so that we could explore the existing socio-economic and cultural barriers in the community through their knowledge and perceptions related to topics around puberty, menstrual health and hygiene, violence, rights, sexual and reproductive health, gender norms, careers, and future planning. We gave a pretested, predesigned questionnaire, which was validated, to the students and asked them to fill it in based on the best of their knowledge and perceptions. The languages were English and Telugu. Data were cleaned, coded, and statistically analyzed using SPSS 21. Descriptive statistics consisting of frequencies and percentages were determined.

Qualitative data were collected from the adolescent girls, parents, educators, CSOs, and policymakers and focused on understanding what is needed to harnessing the full potential of adolescent girls. Qualitative data were collected using the following methods:

TABLE B1: Data Collection Methodology

GROUP	METHODS	MODE OF DATA COLLECTION
Adolescent girls	Focus group discussions	In-person
Parents	Focus group discussions and two key informant interviews	In-person
Civil society organizations (CSOs)	Key informant interview	Online through zoom
Educators	Key informant interview	In-person
Policymakers	Key informant interview	Online through zoom

The qualitative data were analyzed using the Atlas.ti software. The data were collected in local languages and translated to English. The girls were selected using purposive sampling to elicit information from them. The data were collected in a classroom or private places to ensure the confidentiality of the information shared by the participants. The interview with the policymakers and CSOs was done online through the zoom platform. The transcripts were prepared and reviewed to establish an understanding of the discussions with the adolescent girls. The data were coded, and themes were identified. Finally, the analysis was done by examining the reasons of the participants' thoughts and actions and were presented in Microsoft Word.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews lasted 1.5 to 2 hours each. Each FGD involved 12–15 participants. Qualitative data collection from adolescent girls aimed to uncover cultural barriers hindering their empowerment. Similarly, data from parents aimed to elucidate their perspectives, norms, and expectations regarding adolescent girls. Key informant interviews with CSOs and policymakers aimed to identify existing gaps, strategies to bridge them, and assess governmental initiatives, existing gaps, and necessary actions moving forward.

TABLE B2. Data collection details

INSTRUMENT	DATA SOURCE
Structured questionnaire	1,681 girls before attending a VOICE 4 Girls program in their school.
Focus group discussion (FGD) guide	Two FGDs were conducted with adolescent girls 14 girls were selected for the first FGD and 15 girls in the second school.
Key informant interviews and FGDs with parents	Two parents were randomly selected from the community to conduct in-depth interviews. Two FGDs were conducted with the parents in the schools. The first group had 18 parents and second group had 22 parents.
Key informant interview	Two in-depth interviews were conducted with two educators to understand the existing gaps in the systems at the government level and what could be done.
High level interviews	One government official and four leaders from CSOs who have been involved in the advocacy/ policymaking process have been interviewed online.

APPENDIX C

The perspectives of educators, policymakers, and CSOs on empowering adolescents

The research also included perspectives of the policymakers, educators, and CSOs working with adolescent girls. Key informant interview discussion with one policymaker revealed that, with deeply entrenched patriarchal and societal norms, he believed that girls were not able to voice their opinions. He mentioned that "it is essential to build the confidence of the girls to express their opinions. Once they are confident, if we train them on the laws and rights, they will be able to make use of it. Else, seeking legal support is out of the question. For this it is crucial that we equip girls with skills such as negotiation, communication, problem solving, and decisionmaking and leadership to dream about their futures. These girls can then become role models for the other girls in their communities."

Another CSO member and a seasoned child rights activist mentioned that it is important to shift the mind-set of the parents and educate them about the importance of education. He also emphasized the importance of educating the adolescent boys to support the adolescent girls. In his words, "Educating parents is nonnegotiable. If you don't educate the parents, change is unlikely."

Yet another policymaker emphasized that the government has developed various schemes for the welfare of the girls. She mentioned that it is essential for them to become aware about them and access them. The government has equipped the teachers and principals in the schools to handle the issues of the adolescents and take appropriate measures. At the same time, there is a need to work with the existing legal authorities to create legal awareness among the adolescent girls. Gender sensitization sessions for police and lawyers played a crucial role in changing mindsets and attitudes toward cases of violence against women.

The discussions also underscored the importance of government officials understanding grassroots realities and designing programs that benefit both girls and boys. There is a call for a holistic approach to address child marriage issues, with an emphasis on replicating successful models in other educational institutions. They also highlighted the importance of tracking adolescent girls in the communities. One CSO leader mentions that the door-to-door survey in villages revealed that daughters-in-law below the age of 18 were not recorded, highlighting the need for improved data collection methods to identify child brides.

APPENDIX D
Safe space

A safe space, in its simplest form, is described as a location of physical safety that is free from harm and judgment. Such spaces play a significant role in understanding children's lives, given how they are increasingly subject to surveillance and restricted freedom of movement by a risk-averse society fearful of children as both perpetrators and victims of unsafe environments. This space also allows for psychological freedom and promotes the social and emotional conditions that allow children to try new ideas, experiment with identities and ways of being, and make mistakes while learning.

Finally, safe spaces describe the conditions required to facilitate 'free expression.' This includes perceived spaces free from dominant hegemonies.

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Guiding principles of an adolescent girls safe space

- Do no harm.
- Build on existing capacity, resources, and structures.
- Participation and community-based approach.
- Focus on empowerment.
- Focus on human rights and inclusion.
- Develop integrated support systems.
- Establish an approach tailored to each space.
- Maintain sustainability.

APPENDIX E

Perspectives on gender-based violence (GBV)

The girls surveyed in this research reported that GBV was quite common in their communities. When asked about their knowledge and perceptions related to GBV, 70% were unable to identify different forms of violence, and about 50% stated that girls who wear short dresses get sexually assaulted. They also shared that girls from "good" families do not report incidents of violence. During the FGDs, the girls identified multiple forms of GBV around them, reporting increased danger of GBV when girls go out alone, highlighting the sense of insecurity they face. The graphic here is a compilation of some of the what the girls surveyed shared on GBV.

At the same time, the girls in this study most often reported that they lacked knowledge about the legal framework that protects them. It can be inferred that GBV is normalized in their communities and the lack of structural mechanisms are barriers for girls to prevent, recognize, or report incidences of violence.

Glossary/Acronyms

CSO:	Civil society organizations
CUE:	Center for Universal Education
FGD:	Focus group discussions
GBV:	Gender-based violence
GTSS:	Gender-transformative safe spaces
NCPCR:	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
NFHS:	National Family Health Survey
NGO:	Nongovernmental organization
POCSO:	Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act
PWDVA:	Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005
RTE:	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009
SRHR:	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
UNFPA:	United Nations Population Fund

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

It is women and girls who widen the circle of solidarity and hope. Supporting them in taking the lead and promoting feminist leadership widens the circle.

—Anusha Bharadwaj

Anusha believes in the power of feminist youth leadership to transform communities and nations. It is with this conviction that she leads a group of passionate individuals at VOICE 4 Girls, an NGO that strives to eliminate gender inequalities by educating and empowering marginalized adolescent girls and boys. In the last decade, VOICE has impacted over 300,000 adolescents and around 6,000 young men and women. Building on her vision of youth leadership she founded SoCh for Social Change, an organization that has curated unique Social Impact Leadership Programs to help women embark on their social impact journeys and become agents of change in their communities. She also facilitates leadership programs for social entrepreneurs and leaders on global platforms. Anusha is an Ashoka Fellow 2023 (recognized as the world's leading social entrepreneurs) and has been featured in their annual edition of Leading Entrepreneurs, 2023. VOICE's work has been recognized as innovative and transformational to society's systems, providing benefits for adolescent girls that also create ripple effects that improve the lives of millions of people. Anusha was also an Echidna Global Scholar, 2023, at the prestigious Brookings Institution. She has spoken at TEDxWomen Hyderabad and TEDxVCE, amplifying the need for feminist education. Anusha's remarkable contributions have earned her prestigious accolades, including the Great Indian Women of the Year 2021 and the WEF 2019 Award of "Exceptional Women of Excellence." Recognized among the top 17 SDG Women Changemakers of India, Anusha's dedication to social change continues to inspire and uplift communities nationwide.

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About the Echidna Global Scholars Program

The Echidna Global Scholars Program at the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings seeks to catalyze and amplify the impact of local leaders working to advance gender equality in and through education across the Global South.

During a six-month fellowship, Echidna Global Scholars conduct individual research focused on improving learning opportunities and life outcomes for girls, young women, and gender non-conforming people, develop their leadership and evidence-based policy skills, build substantive knowledge on gender and global education issues, and expand their pathways for impact. Upon completion of the fellowship, scholars transition to the Echidna Alumni Network, a growing community of practice aimed at promoting their significant, sustained, and collective influence on gender-transformative education globally and locally.

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