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FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE CAMPAIGN

An online programme on Gender-based Violence
and discrimination for adolescent high school
students in Karnataka

14-16th December 2021

Departments of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj
Primary Secondary Education and Women Child Development
Government of Karnataka and Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT)



In a rural village, in one of the North Karnataka districts, a small group of young Muslim girls, in traditional attire, sat on the floor, in the presence of a teacher. They were looking at a laptop, precariously positioned on a chair. A couple of children craned their necks up to get a better view, hinting that something interesting was happening. There was pin-drop silence. Amidst the dimmed light in the room, sun-rays seeped through in the background revealing a glimmer of hope on the faces of many adolescents.

It was the online programme on GBV conducted as part of the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj's campaign titled 'Freedom from Violence', or Dourjanyadinda Mukti, in Kannada. A set of 'Super Girls', who were 400 km away in the State Institute for Rural Development (SIRD), Bengaluru studio were among the speakers.

The Super Girls had their audience in rapt attention as the programme intended for over 16,000 schools was estimated to have reached between 6-8 lakh high school students of classes 8 to 10, across Karnataka. Dishing out important messages in a friendly manner through satellite-based technology and a Peer-to-Peer learning approach, were Pavithra, Anjali and Rubiya Begum, the teen brigade, among other subject experts.



Schools in Karnataka: 16800+

Student strength: 19,50,000+

Number of devices that connected to the YouTube sessions during the 3-day programme: 25,000*+

Expected number of students reached during the programme: 6 - 8 lakhs*

* Approximate figures

The Super Girls



Pavithra

Anjali

Rubiya

Anjali, one of the three Super Girls from a small village in Koppal taluk, who narrated different types of violence, is blissfully unaware of these reactions on ground in her own district, as she repeated the same messages to a different set of over 5000 schools the next two days, for different set of districts each day.

Pavitra and Rubiya, too, used lively examples to tell about the three traits that adolescents should strive to develop, to counter gender based violence. Self-esteem, self-confidence and other such traits and ideas were conveyed through real life examples in a way that attracted the attention of children in that age group.

On the other end of the efforts to reach the last mile, another school, in Koppal district, with over **320** strength, too, had switched on to the programme with an easy YouTube link. Over 80 students, both boys and girls, attended the session for about three hours. “They are from Koppal,” exclaimed one girl in joy, pointing to the TV screen, at the Bhanapur Government High School, before she answered a question.

When asked if there was anything new that they had learnt from the virtual programme, she said:

Munnis should also get a bike. Even in our village, we have one akka who rides a bike.” After some more thought, she added, “We also heard that violence can be both intentional and unintentional.” She articulated that if only girls have to do some domestic work at home, and if only boys can get bikes, that is not right!

“We always see this Ten, Nine, Eight (**1098**) number but now I know when to use it and how to use it,” chipped in her classmate. “I was always afraid that they would know my name if I complain. Now I know that my name will not come out,” she added with a new understanding of the confidentiality aspect.

Munna and Munni was a story used in the sessions to discuss gender-based discrimination and to make learning fun and convey serious messages. The story-telling mode used by peers who came from a similar rural background as the students watching the programme helped the children identify themselves with the ‘Super Girls.’

The online workshop on GBV had sessions that tackled some of the main social evils like, child marriages, school drop-out and mental health of adolescents.

Dr.S.Selva Kumar, Secretary to the Government, Skill Development Entrepreneurship and Livelihood, and Education Department, said: “The three departments have come together along with KHPT with this special initiative to reach out to the adolescents and youth with messages on adolescent growth, gender-based violence, the impact of social media and networks, legal provisions (POCSO Act) and other support systems.”

“Equipping the adolescents with the information about various laws, schemes, SoS helplines, and facilities available for women in distress is the first step towards making them as change agents,” said Priyanka Mary Francis, an IAS officer, who was in the core group that conceived the programme. Accordingly, these messages were also provided during the three-day programme.

Shilpa Nag CT, IAS, Commissioner, Panchayati Raj, said: “Both boys and girls can achieve their dreams and they should be treated equally whether in education, learning skills or taking part in sports. Girls have started taking leadership roles and they are coming up but still stigma and structural barriers exist. Parents shouldn’t force the girls to discontinue their school when they attain menarche and for child marriage. We should teach the young boys to treat the girls equally in school, at home and the outside also”.

“Childhood is a beautiful period of life. As they grow into adolescence and move into adulthood, slowly the happiness fades away. That is why we need programmes like this that prepare them mentally to not only face these ills but to stop them,” said the PT master, just before the long bell, that brought all the students on to the ground, running with their plates to the tap, before they were served the hot mid-day palav.

“Adolescence is a precious period of life that lays the foundation for the future. Both boys and girls enjoy and struggle through this period, at the same time. This is also the period when boys and girls start to dream to see and create an ideal world for themselves,” said Sumitra, an HM at the Government High School in Bytaranyapura, on the outskirts of Bengaluru, whose doctoral studies relate to adolescence and education.

Every child grows up with the idea that comes up with their upbringing, culture, religion, and the atmosphere in the society they live in. Education, mother and father, tell this is how it is, but when one hits adolescence many thoughts crop up: ‘Is it? Why? Why is it like that?’ Sometimes that questioning leads to more serious issues.

“Yes, sometimes in their mind they say ‘No’, this is not right. But this programme helped them get clarity to articulate their thoughts. The messaging was simple but powerful. It has a great impact on the girls,” added Sumitra. “Yes, they should say ‘NO’ to many things,” she quipped. She asked a teacher to send the video of the girls taking an oath at the end of the programme to the feedback group number.

Online Workshop, the process

Mahila Samakya, Hunger Project, local Panchayat leaders and teachers, along with KHPT staff in 12 districts, took keen interest and supported the workshop in different regions where they were based. In many villages, school drop-outs too attended the programme facilitated by local panchayat leaders.

Rope in boys too

Despite the grave concern on completing her Maths class for students of class 10, a teacher from a school in Koppal was kind enough to let her students attend the online session for over two hours. But she would not allow her students to provide feedback on the programme till they completed their class. But all the students kept their promise, and willingly took the math class during lunch time.

After speaking to the girls, anyone from boys said the teacher and a few hands went up. “Boys too should change their attitudes. There is nothing wrong if I draw a rangoli,” a boy from the last bench blurted out, echoing the words of Super Girl Anjali, and the whole class burst into hearty laughter. But the message had been drilled in.

“Freedom from Violence” campaign is one programme that envisions to support such free thoughts and ideas for the adolescents to explore at a time when they begin to hear and aspire to create an ideal world. They are curious but are also overpowered by traditions, customs and upbringing. Women and girls unequally suffer the consequences of these power dynamics. Many adolescents see violence in many forms in and around their lives. Especially rural girl students are vulnerable because of the culture and poor and illiterate environment at homes and villages they live in.

“Many of the women and girls do not understand or identify violence against women or girls. Our societal practices and attitudes against women have neutralised such sensitive things and women don’t even realise that violence, stigma and discrimination are being perpetrated against them. We take it as something normal. But it is time for us to create awareness, to start from our own homes, and I am sure we can bring in a change in the society,” said Mohan HL, CEO, KHPT.

“Drilling in right teachings into the minds of the boys at this age creates a foundation and builds a value system that respects equality and boosts mental health. The campaign addresses this urgent need,” said the male English teacher in a Bhanapur school in Koppal taluk, who made the boys and girls face each other in small groups to facilitate a discussion, when there was a power-cut during the transmission of the programme. The class 8 students even prepared a list of questions to be sent as feedback during this time.

Conclusion

The Super Girls spoke about some tools to tackle Violence and Discrimination against women and girls. self- esteem, self-confidence and awareness and calling out superstitions were some of them. These traits were drilled into the minds of the adolescents through peer-facilitators, who were from rural areas. They connected well and impacted the students, who could identify themselves with these ambassadors, who grew up in similar backgrounds and faced life, and spoke about lived-experiences that have a telling impact on young minds.

“It is a good programme. Such campaigns are required to change the community perspective on gender,” Prakash T, a panchayat member of Kolagallu village, Ballari, wrote in the chat box. When asked later over the phone, he felt that: “Children know these things in bits and pieces and most of it is acquired from sources like fellow students which are not reliable, and the information may not be right. So, students of this age, both boys and girls, need to develop the right mindset.

They don’t have clarity on these topics, as practices and reality on the ground are different from what they study or hear at school from their teachers. These programmes help them acquire the basic knowledge which is authentic and which they can rely on.”

“They taught us that the colour of the skin does not matter. It is what is inside that makes the balloon fly. So, we have to develop self confidence. We should not say yes when we want to say no. They are telling so many good things which make sense. I want to meet them and talk more about these things,” said a 9th class girl spontaneously, a day after she attended the programme in a Bengaluru school. “I also come from a village like them. But I am in ‘B’ section,” she boasted, as instruction of medium in all ‘B’ sections in that school is English. “But my father is a driver,” said the daughter. All of 14 years, the bubbly young thing, has a group of friends, who all shot videos to express their feedback.



Learnings

The 'Freedom from Violence' campaign was conceived as part of the Platinum jubilee of the country's 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' celebration, which commenced in July. It began as a 10-week programme by Rural Development and Panchayat Raj ministry on Oct 2, of which the 3-day virtual programme for adolescents was a key component. Some of the learnings from the mass programme to reach the last mile and to replicate in a sustainable manner at scale are given below:

- Continuous awareness programmes are needed as co-curricular or follow-up activities in the form of clubs or other interactive activities for students at the local level.
- Active involvement of parents and boys is another urgent need. Roping in boys to broaden their understanding of gender and gender equality, violence and discrimination have to be discussed more frequently.
- Peer-to-peer learning as a methodology has its own special benefits. So, it is important to continue using peers at the forefront of these awareness programmes. Students were able to connect and relate to their own experiences and learn the key issues in an easy-to-understand format.
- Addressing gender norms and social norms is a pre-requisite before the Peer model can reinforce other key info like awareness on laws that is already available to the students in public domain.
- Mass awareness campaigns have their own benefits like bringing in the right perspective that will have a lasting impact on the child and bring on to the same page.
- Ensuring teachers' participation is important to have sustainable learning and to prevent back-lash and imposition of traditional or conservative mindset. Knowledge and awareness will empower the students, especially the girl child, so teachers should not perceive that this awareness or new-found knowledge may provide unnecessary freedom to the adolescents.



KHPT

IT Park, 5th Floor, 1-4, Rajajinagar Industrial Area, Behind KSSIDC Admin office, Rajajinagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka - 560 044. Ph: + 91 80 4040 0200 | Website: www.khpt.org

For more information, please contact:

Dr Maithreyi Ravikumar, Strategic Lead, Adolescent Health email: maithreyi.ravikumar@khpt.org