NARRATIVE REPORT: APRIL 2023 TO MARCH 2024



YOUTH DRIVEN INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS GENDER INEQUALITY & VIOLENCE IN BIRBHUM, SOUTH 24 PARGANAS, PURULIA & KOLKATA

Working with Men and Boys

EQUIDIVERSITY FOUNDATION
Promoting Equity in Diversity

ABSTRACT

We have tried to experiment with understanding of how gender and masculinity shapes the worldview of the youth and adult men and impacts on authoritative leadership. We have tried to strengthen a catalytic scale by working deeper with the youth and their eco-system - peers, the parents, teachers, educational institutions, political leadership and Gram Panchayat members. Much of our work with them revolved around balancing power imbalance in their relationship with the youth. Gender mainstreaming at different and diverse institutions from schools and colleges to leather industry to educational centres accessed by extremely marginalized students (children of sex workers) has been slowly earning us the name of a gender resource centre. Our workshops with local political leaders from our field areas resulted in a lot of self-reflection and open conversations. This report tries to capture stories and journeys of many boys, men and their eco-system. It brings forth their triumphs, their desperations and lends the readers insights from their lived experiences.

Following my heart

Gadadhar Bittar, a boy studying in class five had a great desire to dance. His friends and neighbours would make fun of him. Undeterred, Gadadhar continued to dance hidden away from sight. Slowly his passion for dance was starting to wither. When he went to class nine, he came to Labpur, Birbhum for tuition and saw an advertisement from a dance school. His desire to dance was rekindled and he grappled to find a way to override the financial limitation of his family and the taunts that he knew he would have to face from friends and relatives alike.

He would visit the dance school every day and wait outside finding the courage to step in. One day he entered. He shared his desire to pursue dance with the teacher. Seeing his passion, the teacher agreed to let him join. Gadadhar took a risk- he decided to discontinue his academic tuition and use the fees to join the dance class. This affected his studies. He suffered a setback and he failed to get promoted. The strong reaction of his parents made him quit the dance school.

The dance teacher, after learning about this took a leap of faith and asked him to join back the dance school, free of cost. Gadadhar was overjoyed but still lacked the courage to dance in front of others. He joined Equidiversity Foundation facilitated youth group in 2023 and after a few sessions decided to undergo regular counselling. Slowly he started gaining the mental strength and courage to face his fear of dealing with what people thought of him. He mustered the courage to perform his dance for the first time in a small programme organized by his dance teacher. In January'2024, he took the stage of Samyo Mela (Equality Fair) in front of nearly 2000 people and earned a lot of appreciation. Since then, Gadadhar has been performing his dance at various awareness camps and events in the area. His parents have also come to accept him and his passion.

Says Gadadhar, "I want to prove to everyone that it is okay for boys to dance. You do not turn into a girl if you dance. I want to form a boys' dance team in my area."

When there is a will, there is a way

"I have participated in the youth group since August 2021. I live in Motilal village of Dakshin Gangadharpur Gram Panchayat, South 24 Paraganas. We are seven members in the family, my father works as daily labourer; all six members are dependent on my father. After completing high school, my family kept pressurizing me to get married. I repeatedly heard statements like, 'You are a girl, will you work and feed us? There is no use studying anymore, a good match has been found, you will have to agree, otherwise you will be the loser.' These repeated words made me feel that I needed to agree to this marriage.

When Equidiversity Foundation staff visited my home to talk about the 'Wenlido' training they wanted me to participate in, I told them about my impending marriage. They repeatedly spoke to my parents and me. My father clearly informed me that henceforth, I will not go to any meeting or session of Equidiversity Foundation. But didi persisted and kept talking to me and my parents. After talking to didi again and again I changed my mind and clearly informed my parents that I will not get married. My parents were starting to have doubts as well and I negotiated with them to allow me to go for 'Wenlido' training. After that my resolve not to get married became stronger. My marriage plan was also dropped. Later, my results came out and I passed high school. My parents are now interested in sending me to college. I want to be a journalist in future".

Nandita Roy,17 years 11 months.

Executive Summary

The funding we received in 2023-24 helped to restructure and reorganize activities according to emerging needs. We worked directly and deeply with the community of **3759 members** from youth boys and girls to youth, to adults trying to usher in transformative change by challenging attitudes and behaviours, creating role models and making the system responsive and empathetic.

We created a number of audiovisual tools for community engagement. From April 2023 to March 2024, we conducted 732 sessions and meetings with boys, girls, children on gender, empathy, communication, child rights, mental health, male and female reproductive system, physical and psychological changes during adolescence, aspiration, masculinity and child abuse. **We reached out to a total of 145 groups of boys (children and youth) and girls (children and youth) and closely worked with 2368 members including 1131 boys and 1237 girls**. In addition, we also worked with 3322 children of 37 Child Parliaments in two academic years.

Another focus of our work was enhancing empathy as a skill among children and youth. Perceptible changes were noticed when boys were found to have the confidence to share how they have managed to work on their understanding of use of power over their sisters- from an attitude of domination to dialoguing. Another area that saw a shift was the understanding that a girl/woman had the right to walk away from a relationship if it did not suit her and any label being attached to her for her action was a patriarchal ploy to keep her under control.

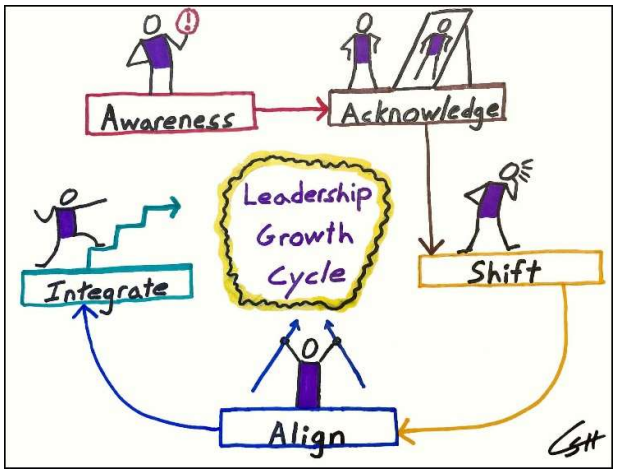
Gender mainstreaming at different and diverse institutions from schools and colleges to leather industry to educational centres accessed by extremely marginalized students (children of sex workers) has been slowly earning us the name of a gender resource centre. We have tried to experiment with understanding of how gender and masculinity shapes the worldview of the youth and adult men and impacts on authoritative leadership. Our workshops with local political leaders from our field areas resulted in a lot of self-reflection and open conversations. One consequence of the workshop has been a political leader from Purulia going back to his community and taking initiative of forming youth groups to include them in gender conversations and visiting homes to convince parents for allowing them to send their daughters and sons to Kolkata for residential leadership workshop. The block level school inspectors (SI) have taken interest in the child parliament process and suggested to expand it to other schools. 14 other schools have also contacted us for understanding the child parliament process in their schools.

The funding has helped us strengthen catalytic scale by working deeper with the youth and their eco-system - peers, the parents, teachers, educational institutions, political leadership and Gram Panchayat members. Much of our work with them revolved around balancing power imbalance in their relationship with the youth**. We have worked deeply with 1772 members of the eco-systems of whom 642 were men to encourage a mindset shift.**

Our team members hail from the community they represent. The complexities, pressures and powerlessness experienced in their lives mirrors the communities they work with. Capacity building of team, providing them with mental health support, personal growth sessions and review meetings of our work along with annual retreat went a long way to instill strength and motivation.

While trying to understand how change has taken place by increasing the involvement of diverse stakeholders, the highlights can be summarized into two broad strategic areas.

We witnessed a marked leadership growth amongst children and youth in the community. While they became more aware, they started acknowledging themselves as leaders having the ability to make their voices heard by the system and shift norms by taking people along.



Leadership Among Children: Till December'23, 418 elected ministers & members from 18 primary schools went through various sessions to finally culminate in an open shishu sansad sabha (child sansad sabha) where 554 children from 30 schools (12 schools outside our work area were invited by the Gram Panchayat to send their representatives) took part and raised issues of child safety like lack of boundary wall, broken toilet doors, tubewells and pumps, unclean water, made demands for seeds and boundary for nutrition gardens, playing materials, books and library. They also brought to the notice of the Gram Panchayat the need for sudden monitoring visit to check the quality of midday meals as well as dealing with domestic violence at specific homes to enable children to come to school regularly. The 4 sabhas were attended by 58 Gram Panchayat members and 30 teachers.

Leadership Among Youth: Mentoring & handholding a group of youth leaders (75 Boys and 74 girls) was one of the major highlights. These youth underwent a journey of personal growth learning about their own leadership capital and what it meant to be an inclusive leader and using power with responsibility. Some emerged as positive role models for younger children trying to put their learnings into action. It was very encouraging to see young leaders becoming active in their areas, looking at problems from a development lens, organizing health camps for women and girls, summer camps for gender dialogue with children and were also able to intervene in 29 Child Marriages and adolescent related issues across fields with Village Level Child Protection Committees or with EDF support.

We saw some results from our persistent strategy of making the eco-system surrounding the youth more open and empathetic towards gender issues.

After sustained efforts through repeated meetings with GP members and political leadership, Samya Mela emerged as a community collective programme with the GP and community ready to share the risks and benefits. Rs. 1,11,000 was contributed financially by the community towards the programme. Aside of this, community hall, abound human resource were also contributions by the community.

After getting the news that 16 years old Sudha had tried to take her life after being beaten severely by her parents who had brought her back from elopement, members of Jamna VLCPC rushed to her home and dealt with her parents firmly. They facilitated for Sudha's counseling, kept an eye on her parents and slowly convinced her to start going to school. With the help of the local Gram Panchayat, they also conducted a camp in the locality on underage elopement, its impact and strategies to deal with it.

Detailed Narration

Strategic Objective

Equidiversity Foundation seeks to enable a gender sensitive community and gender responsive eco-system promoting gender issues by enabling men and boys to –

- Create a safe space to express freely and challenge notions of rigid masculinity and gender norms.
- Question and negotiate with the patriarchal power dynamics, bring out women's issues and those of the marginalized in the public domain and protest gender-based violence.
- Encourage an overall qualitative change in lives of people especially women and other marginalized persons through adoption of gender-responsive planning, budgeting, and institutional strengthening.
- Emerge as inclusive and gender just leaders and allies and partners of women and girls' groups to amplify their voice and visibility of their issues.

The Project has two broad elements:

A. Individual work with the men and boys from childhood to youth in order to:
   (a) increase men and boys' perception of themselves as responsible, caring, enabling and non-violent partners and individuals;
   (b) strengthen empathy as a skill;
   (c) emerge as allies of the gender equality movement and inclusive-gender just leaders;
   (d) strengthen their skills that will help them survive in the times of economic slowdown;
   (e) increase their support network that acts as a safety net and provide opportunities to grow collectively; and
   (f) prepare the children (6-11 years) to be reflective, aware and confident through the model of 'Child Parliament' to step into adolescence.

   This Project on the one hand provides an opportunity to the youth/adolescents/men to look at the gender trappings within themselves and challenge them, on the other hand it also encourages them to emerge as change leaders and mobilize other youth to become more aware of the patriarchal control on men and women.

B. Building a supportive eco-system:
   This Project creates an opportunity to enable and strengthen the eco-system for gender inclusion and awareness by-
   (a) creating a space for young girls and women to understand and question the gender stereotypes that they uphold; also get an opportunity to express their deepest thoughts, work with their aspirations through some skill development and work with their vulnerabilities in a shared safe space and also to provide leadership in bringing other girls and women in the space and challenge patriarchal norms. This approach is important as it creates another opportunity for the boys and men to work with these girls and women, to understand each other, challenge fixed social expectations and roles together;

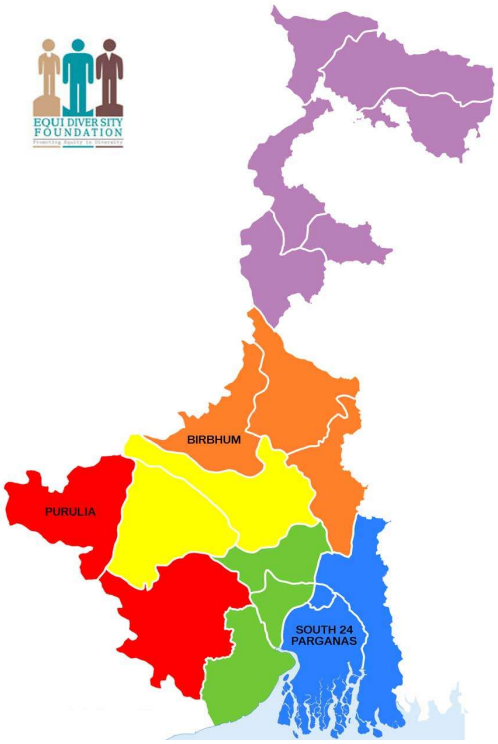
(b) bring the local gram panchayat and male leaders into the dialogue and as partners for gender inclusion in gram panchayat planning and budgeting;

(c) strengthen institutions like village level child protection committees, to enable them to identify gender based violence, discrimination and child rights violation and encourage them to take action;

(d) link the youth and child's groups with the existing Nari Jagaran Committees enabling joint action;

(e) bring parents, teachers into the dialogue and encourage them to become part of the gender equality narrative; and

(f) use research, storytelling and documentation as tools to the state government and rights institutions.



Overall Objective: A resilient and gender sensitive community that is motivated to intervene and stop gender-based violence.

In this Project, while gender is a cross cutting theme, mental health will be the overall approach.

Project areas during this reporting period:

Birbhum- Labpur & Nanoor Blocks- 5 GPs

Jamna, Thiba, Dwarka, Daskalgram Kareya II, Kirnahar II

South 24 Parganas- Pathar Protima Block- 2 GPs

Dakshin Gangadharpur, Sreenarayanpur Purnachandrapur

Purulia- Jhalda II Block- 2 GPs

Tatuara, Nowahatu

Kolkata- Ward No. 93 & 99

Geographically diverse

Politically challenging

Natural Calamity prone

Categorized as 'backward districts' of WB

KR1: Increased ability to understand gender norms, citizenship rights, critical life skills, and challenge gender stereotypes at a personal level in 70 boys' and men's groups in nine gram panchayats and two wards of Birbhum, Purulia, S.24 Parganas, and Kolkata.
KR2: Emergence of new thought and youth leaders at the community level to promote rights, inclusion, gender equality and stop gender-based violence and become involved and active democratic citizens.

Work with men and boys' groups

The youth group members while continuing to work with us, are also found to be struggling with their own adolescent issues in terms of selection of vocation or career, relationship-particularly dealing with heartbreak and navigating through set gender role expectations. Representing economically marginalized families, exploring non masculine vocations for boys is a challenge. The young members in the groups had shared earlier that they needed discussion on their carrier pathways as most felt that their parents were not equipped to guide them about career choices after class xii. Pressure to earn a livelihood coupled with a lack of awareness- opportunities for alternate livelihoods continued to be a burden for boys rendering them powerless to negotiate. As a strategy to offer the youth with a guide with a bunch of information about opportunities in the public sector, Equidiversity Foundation designed easy guideline book in Bengali called **"AMAR PACHONDE AMAR CARRIER" or 'My Career, My Choice"**.

From April to March, we have worked with a total of **51 boys' groups** and we were able to reach out to a total of 687 boys in the age group between 13-21 years.

231 sessions were conducted with them and 25 daylong and 4 residential workshops on diverse issues. Slowly the youth were seen opening up with their life problems and emotional issues. 11 boys sought counselling support. More than 33 counselling sessions were taken by them.

In the words of 16 years old youth leader Rajesh from district, "Through gender training, leadership training and various sessions from Equi Diversity Foundation, I have learned how to express empathy and talk to people of different ages. As a result, my confidence has increased, my communication skills have increased. I used to hang out all day, messing with girls, passing sexually coloured remarks. I didn't have the courage to help when someone was in danger. I did wrong myself and I didn't protest when someone else did it. Now I discuss child and women rights in various awareness camps. In case of child marriage, I inform Equidiversity Foundation and try to stop it. I still find it hard to negotiate with the Panchayat".

Some Highlights:

Theatre Groups

32 girls and 17 boys had formed 3 theatre groups in the three districts learning about theatre and developing skills to perform. A master trainer who is a theatre personality pf repute – Mr. Bapi Dasgupta took interest in developing the teams. The target was to ensure a public performance during Samya Mela (Equality Fair) in the three districts. We have consciously decided to develop a mixed team comprising of both boys and girls enabling them to interact with each other as colleagues, team members and friends. Youth leaders (7 girls and 7 boys) have shown interest in managing the group, calling the members for rehearsals etc.

The theatre group in Birbhum expressed their dissatisfaction over the theme and script that was being suggested. This resulted in further discussions with them and new script was being developed.

"For the first time, we took a train to go to Kolkata to learn theatre. There were 22 of us, taking responsibility for ourselves and others. My mother has heard a lot from the neighbours about me. But my mother said, 'If you have the desire to go where you want to, you can go. If you listen to what the neighbours say, you will be a prisoner at home for life.'- Soma (Sonali), youth leader from Purulia.

16 years old Sumon is a vibrant young man but lacked confidence due to a speech impairment. "I was not very comfortable talking to everyone as I spoke in a different way," he says. He resides in the Tarangar village of Shrinaraayanpur Purnachandrapur area with his family. "I have gained a clear understanding of gender and relationships from the EquiDiversityFoundation, I have been part of leadership training too." says Sumon.

He is skilled in drawing, making clay sculptures and used these skills to share and teach the children un the Summer Camp. After joining the youth group, he has learnt to free himself from negative thoughts. He has also joined the theatre group in the locality. "My self-confidence has increased a bit, and I have developed the ability to make people understand. My skills and understanding on various topics have improved."

Sumon believes that audio and video sessions are very attractive, and if such sessions are conducted in his team, other members will also enjoy them.

Till date the 17 members of the theatre groups have given 8 performances in various awareness camps reaching out to more than 2000 people.





Neel Bagdi is a member of the youth group in Dwarka Gram Panchayat's Panchpara village. He is 16 years old and has passed Madhyamik, studying in class XI. He naturally writes poetry inspired by what he sees in nature or society. When his friends read his poems, they all laugh and make fun of him. Neel feels quite sad about it. As a result, he can't connect with anyone, doesn't open up to others, and sits alone in silence. He attends meetings regularly but keeps his thoughts to himself.

EDF community facilitators closely monitored his actions, and one day, they separated him from the group to talked with him privately. From then, EDF workers regularly give him time to listen to his poems and discuss them. This has encouraged him and made him bring two new friends in the youth group.

Leadership: Youth as Role Models

Catalytic scale involves creating widespread, systemic change by empowering individuals and communities to act as catalysts for further transformation. One of the ways this can be done is by encouraging youth to take active roles in their communities fostering a sense of responsibility and belonging.

We created 10 short videos in Bengali on gender discrimination, sexuality, gender based violence, inclusion, child rights and disability rights to spread the awareness on gender equality. We intend these videos to emerge as tools for the young people to start a conversation.

When you get to work with youth, you end up reinvigorated and refreshed. Equidiversity Foundation organized two parallel workshops with boys (16-25 years) and girls (15-22 years) for 4 days that began with an outing together followed by 4 days of separate workshops for boys and girls and ended with a joint session. The other exciting aspect was how the youngest and newest members of Equidiversity Foundation took charge as managers and organizers. 28 boys and 21 girls from Birbhum, Purulia and South 24 Parganas participated. *Sayak (Sayan), a youth leader from South 24 Parganas, added, "Leadership used to mean becoming a party leader to us. But through this training, we learned how to provide leadership. We understood that boys and girls can work together, and we learnt about girls' issues".*

"We used to think that boys and girls should be in separate groups, even if they are working on different tasks. But this training made us realize that we can work on the same issues together. In our area, people would gossip if they saw us talking to girls, assuming we were in a romantic relationship. This training changed that perception." - Partha (Pritam), youth leader from South 24 Parganas on leadership workshop.

"I have been to Kolkata with my father before, but I enjoyed this training a lot. I learned how to take responsibility in stopping child marriage cases, and we all worked together to create an ideal village using our creativity. I want to apply this learning in my own community."- Rakiba (Rokeya), youth leader, Purulia

- 86 boys from the earlier year were identified for a two days residential gender and masculinity workshop in Birbhum, Purulia and South 24 Parganas.
- Another highlight was 4 Youth leaders (Boys) participating in an Eastern Region Youth Carnival held in Kolkata, where 60 youth- boys & girls from many

Leadership Roles taken up by the Youth

- *Mobilization of youth by youth*
- *Leading in group discussions*
- *Organizing and implementing awareness camps on gender using games within the community*
- *67 boys and 49 girls show leadership abilities and took various responsibilities*
- *18 cases of domestic violence, child marriages were referred to EDF and NJC by youth*
- *26 girls and 14 boys supported the EDF team to implement the Child Parliament voting process*
- *17 boys and 11 girls lead from the front to engage the 112 Ministers of Child Parliament in a 2 days Summer Camp*
    - *They escorted the children from their homes to the camp and back.*
    - *Conducted gender sessions with them*
    - *Engaged the children through*

organisations came together to discuss their issues.

- 2 youth boys and 2 youth girls who are members of Bhabna network youth group, actively participated in the workshop on 'Cyber safety and Cyber Law' and 2 days residential training on 'Child marriage & Psychosocial impact of Child marriage'. They presented the current trends with regard to child marriage in their community and exchange their experiences with lawyers.

- 8 youth boys, 2 youth girls and 9 NJC members jointly decided to collaborate with the support of EDF to cater to the health needs of the community, especially for women and girls by mobilizing and managing heath camps in 2 GPs of South 24 Parganas. 193 people (136 women and 56 men) accessed the camps. This joint programme was conceived following a health screening done last year in collaboration with another NGO named Dito. The findings from the screening with 32 women in the age group of 22 – 60 years had revealed that women and girls were severely anemic and suffered from gynecological & diabetes issues. The two GPs lack any formal doctor in the locality. Government PHCs are 2 km away and the health needs are generally catered by 'quack' doctors. It was felt that this was also an opportunity for the youth to understand the intersectional ties of gender and health.



- 6 youth boys organized 2 awareness camp against domestic violence through screening of films and holding discussions reaching out to 63 people.

- Joint awareness programmes by youth boys, girls and Nari Jagaran Committee members lead to organizing 37 camps on child rights, safety, domestic violence. 57 boys, 77 girls and 147 NJC members were active in these camps reaching out to people. Tableau based awareness method was used by youth of South 24 Parganas and Purulia to reach the last mile houses.

- Solidarity Programme through Raksha Bandhan: 28 youth boys and 13 youth girls spent two tireless days making 858 rakhis for children of 8 schools and each other as a show of friendship and deeper bond. 8 youth from the Rangkol bustee (Kolkata field) decided to tie Rakhis for deepening trust and cooperation from the police force of Jadavpur Police Station. This was also an opportunity for the young boys and girls to interact with the police and break the fear of them.

- Holi, the festival of colour, love and spring is celebrated with a lot of excitement everywhere. However, incidents of sexual harassment and abuse also occur. Forceful application of colour without consent and at the pretext that it is a festival meant for enjoyment and no one should take offense, leads to fear, harassment and trauma not only for girls but also animals. This year it was decided that the youth will plan a "Safe Holi" campaign to make people aware of the importance of consent and sexual harassment. 6 awareness camps on safe holi were held in the communities of South 24 Paraganas at the initiative of 20 boys and 14 girls who reached 389 directly, talking and distributing leaflets. Youth in Birbhum and Purulia used tableaus to reach 72 villages of 5 Gram Pnchayats. This campaign was led by 130 teenagers, 55 children and 68 NJC members. Through this campaign we have reached around

16000 people in our field areas. Young people made placards, posted on Facebook, distributed leaflets and delivered messages to people in schools and in their own neighbourhoods. The messages included "I will not give colour to animals"; "I will not give colour to anyone against their consent"; "I will say no to colours if I don't want it." As a result of this campaign, youth became vocal in their neighbourhoods talking about not forcing colours on people especially girls.





Youth leader Sabuj says," Every year on Holi, some people in our area would drink alcohol and create trouble. They would forcefully touch girls and torture dogs. But in the area where we did the safe Holi campaign, later we came to know that no such incident happened this year".

❖ One immediate impact of the different awareness programmes was the reporting of 90 cases of domestic violence, child marriage, sexual abuse etc.

Enabling young girls & women to become confident leaders

In the village of Kochahatu in Purulia, lives a girl named Sonali Mahato. Sonali was 17 years old when one day her married elder sister Pronita Mahato met with an unfortunate accident at her in-laws' house when a fire broke out. Pronita tragically lost her life leaving behind two infant children. Afterward, Pronita's husband, took their two children, a son and a daughter, to his inlaws' house. Sonali's parents decided that being the maternal aunt, Sonali will be best suited to take care of her sister's children. They asked Sonali to marry their son-in-law. Sonali kept mum at home but informed the EDF team members about this decision and sought support. Afterward, the team along with the mental health personnel talked to Sonali's parents and made them understand that it's not suitable to marry a girl at such a young age. Consequently, Sonali's parents decided to put a stop to the marriage. Sonali is now 19 years old, single, continuing with her education and, at the same time, looking after Pronita's two children.

- We worked with 757 girls through **57** girls' groups in this reporting period. 251 sessions were conducted on gender, rights as well as 21 day long sessions. 3 residential workshops were also conducted to encourage them to leave their localities and travel alone. 101 girls from the earlier year were identified for a two days residential gender workshop in Birbhum, Purulia and South 24 Parganas. WENLIDO self defense workshops were conducted with the girls to connect with their inner strength and learn techniques to defend themselves.

Rathi Hazra, a 16-year-old girl from Haranandapur village in Birbhum, is a student in the tenth grade. She had decided to elope with a boy from the neighbouring village, leaving her home in pursuit of love. Upon hearing the news, Sathi's parents immediately rescued her made no bones about their disapproval of the action.

This traumatic incident took a toll on Sathi's mental well-being, pushing her to the brink of attempting suicide. Her father reported the matter to the Child Protection Committee in the village, who, in turn, informed EDF about the situation. Counselling for Rathi begun, and after four months of consistent support, she has started to return to a more stable state. She is now reconnecting with life, participating in the youth group, and also continuing with her education.

- 21 girls and 21 parents sought regular counseling support from EDF
- Our work in Kolkata has started slowly. We have identified two ward areas- 93 and 99 to begin our work with the youth. We have formed 1 girls' group with 10 members including 1 boy in a slum area called Rangkol. We have also tied up with Raipur Girls' High School which is a government sponsored residential school, for regular sessions with 18 girls from class viii-x. These young girls come from an economically marginalized background with many of their mothers are separated or abandoned. Most of the girls are undergoing adolescent changes and facing emotional issues and teachers were finding it difficult to handle them. Till March'24, 30 sessions were conducted with these two groups. We did a needs assessment with both the students and the teachers separately and developed a curriculum based on their feedback. They are so happy to get a space to share about their own lives that they have opened up to talk about sexual abuse by father or neighbour, suicide or death of either parents, separated parents or parents remarrying etc. and how all these have created long standing trauma. Now we will follow up this group every month with customized plan to help them heal and grow.



- 10 girls from a group in the urban area of Kolkata decided to celebrate Rakhi festival with the police. The purpose of this visit to the police station was to stop fearing the police and also for the police to engage with young people.
- 2 Awareness campaigns were conducted in two pockets of Kolkata (Gobindopur and Rangkol) which aimed to make people aware about domestic violence and child marriage. Using various games and street play, we reached to 150 people from that area.

We have been working with Raipur Girls High School for some time and news came from the school that a girl from their school was planning to get married. The girl was found with a boy in a compromising situation and the parents took an immediate decision to marry her off. We intervened and contacted the South Barasat police station as well as he girl's family. The girl was in a trauma.

We managed to counsel and convince the parents to stop the marriage. Through repeated counselling and support, the girl was slowly convinced to re-enrol in a different school in Dakshin Barasat.

- Equidiversity Foundation is part of a network called One Billion Raising where various organizations of Kolkata are connected. An awareness program was organized by this network in the Dhakuria area of Kolkata. 4 Girls from the Rangkal group managed information stalls and played games to make public aware about gender issues. The other highlight in the event was the participation of 16 girls from Raipur School who out up a bold street play on rights and condonation of gender based violence in public.

Puja, a resident of DasKalgram - 2 No. Gram Panchayat, Devgram hamlet is 15 years old and is studying in the tenth grade. She has been associated with the youth group for the past 2 years. Puja has always been very timid and keeps to herself all the time. She doesn't want to mix with everyone.

For the first time Puja tried to negotiate with her parents to let her fo to Kolkata for a residential training. She was denied permission. But Puja has a strong desire in her heart to go for the trainings and be with other adolescents. The next opportunity came within Birbhum, during organizing and planning the Summer Camp with Child Parliament members. Puja decided to play an active part and take charge of the camp along with others. She negotiated again, and this time got permission to stay away from home for two nights managing the camp.

One day, she also confronted a group of boys harassing her on their way back from school. Her courage and self-confidence have increased significantly, making her parents very happy.

Work with Parents

The second most remarkable thing that happened is the increased involvement of the parents, especially mothers. Interestingly, we were also able to engage some fathers as well. But this time the parents were ready to understand what their wards are doing in the sessions. More over as we are going to introduce discussions on reproductive health, sex, sexuality, relationship it was necessary for them to understand the need. With West Bengal becoming No.1 in India in child marriage and teenage pregnancy according to NFHS-5 data, the guardians were really worried too. We had 92 meetings apart from 1028 home visits and reached 896 parents of group members to discuss these issues. Of the parents, we reached out to 227 (20.3%) fathers as well. 4 workshops with 99 parents were conducted in Birbhum, Purulia, South 24 Parganas. Their responses were very positive and they also started talking about own experiences as an adolescent and agreed to attend further sessions. We witnessed a shift as previously they would not agree to be part of meetings on the pretext of heavy household chores which they are still doing.

"Earlier, there was a misconception that if a boy and a girl talk together and mingle, they will fall in love, run away and get married. Having joined EDF, we have realised that girls need to be given the freedom and right to move around on their own.

I now think that women need to know the outside world. I want my daughter to study and try to become self-reliant. My daughter should get more training from EDF and understand her rights and stand with the oppressed women in the society". Jyotsna Banik, Mother of a member of the girls' group

Working with children from 6-12 years

- KR3. Improved capacity of the children/students of primary schools to provide leadership within their schools through Child Cabinet and in the community where they are able to voice as well as address issues that concern them.



Following a lifecycle approach, we have started working with children in the 18 primary schools and from class III-V, aged between 9-11 years and then hope to transition them into our youth groups of boys and girls. Hence hopefully we are looking to work with these young minds for 3-4 years. 418 elected ministers & members of **Child Parliament** from 18 primary schools went through various sessions to finally culminate in an open shishu sansad sabha (child sansad sabha) in December 2023, where 554 children from 30 schools (12 schools outside our work area were invited by the Gram Panchayat to send their representatives) took part and raised issues of child safety like lack of boundary wall, broken toilet doors, tubewells and pumps, unclean water, made demands for seeds and boundary for nutrition gardens, playing materials, books and library. They also brought to the notice of the Gram Panchayat the need for sudden monitoring visit to check the quality of midday meals as well as dealing with domestic violence at specific homes to enable children to come to school regularly. The 4 sabhas were attended by 58 Gram Panchayat members and 30 teachers.

*18 schools where Child parliament started, instituted the **Moner Baksho** to encourage children to share their thoughts, emotions and problems keeping anonymity. Issues identified by children in the **'Thought and Feeling Box'-** included domestic abuse, bullying in school, conflict with friends, the Prime Minister not being inclusive etc.*

Engaging children through Child Parliament in Primary Schools in 2024: We have initiated Child Parliament in 19 primary schools of 7 Gram Panchayats. Purulia Unit chose their first school for a child parliament in 2024. 206 children filed self-nominations and campaigned for themselves. 1371 children elected their preferred candidates by voting on ballot paper. 127 candidates won the election. 311 members of cabinet. Those who lost the election got a chance along with some other nominees to form the different cabinets for the ministers. A total of 438 children became part of the cabinet including 127 elected candidates. This year, the boys outnumbered the girls with 210 of them becoming part of the cabinet against 206 girls. However, when it came of winning elections, more girls won them-69 against 58 boys. The cabinet has taken oath to take up responsibility to keep their schools clean, to be inclusive leaders, respect everyone and ensure that everybody participates.

- 14 youth boys and 26 girls assisted the Child Parliament process -particularly managing the voting process.

- Along with the children it was most exciting to see the teachers' involvement in the process. Our teams met 76 teachers repeatedly to convince them about the process. Initially they were reluctant but at the end they were very active from the nomination filing to oath taking ceremony. 3 two days workshop with 69 teachers were conducted on gender-mental health and child protection. The Sub Inspector (SI) of Primary Schools notified the teachers for the workshop.
  We have already designed a module with sessions around gender equality, rights, diversity, safe and unsafe touch, roles and responsibilities of the cabinet and the Ministers, managing emotions etc. More than 250 sessions were conducted with the children.



"If we can gather at meetings and discussions like this every 2-3 months, we can also voice our work-related difficulties and engage in discussions. We lack such opportunities."

"I've forgotten how we had spent our childhood. But being able to talk about those days (state of destitution, shortcomings, pain, not getting something, mental pressure) is somewhat relieving for us."

- Our team made 209 home visits and met with 392 parents of the children through 45 meetings. Like the youth groups we also made an effort to include 68 fathers in the process.

Highlights

Summer Camp

Pairing children with youth leaders can offer guidance, support, and inspiration. These relationships help young children learn from the experiences of others and develop their own leadership styles. That is what 28 youth leaders (17 boys and 11 girls) did by designing, managing and bringing their leadership styles in to be with their younger versions. The result was an energized, creative process where Equidiversity Foundation took a back seat and watched leadership in action.

- Equidiversity Foundation's Summer Camp with 112 Ministers of Child Parliament was an opportunity for the 'little' ones to spend two nights outside their homes and villages with other children. The Summer Camp provided them with an open and creative space to experiment new things, experience joy and camaraderie. The Camp offered a



space to question and challenge gender stereotypes, an opportunity to be with each other, hear one another.

- 26 adolescents got the unique opportunity to become role models, leaders and managers of the Camp. They learnt to be accountable for others and to use their creative talents to engage and teach the young ones. Nari Jagaran Committee ensured safety, hygiene and sustenance in the camp.

Nutrition garden

- In 2 schools of Birbhum, 32 children undertook a programme called "Eat your fruit and grow a tree" as part of nutrition and environment preservation sessions. 500 fruit saplings were planted by the children following a rally they took out on 15th August and took a pledge to take care of the trees.
- 182 children and 65 youth participated and increased their skills to build and nurture nutrition gardens in 9 schools and 94 homes. The nutrition gardens had a combination of 14 types of vegetables, leafy vegetables and medicinal plants. The nutrition gardens were also accompanied by vermicompost pits. The uniqueness about the programme was that not only did the children learn about nutrition, but also about sustainable agriculture and learnt to practice it. As many schools having Child Parliament did not have adequate space for a nutrition garden, they children of these schools sat down and discussed which of their friends should grow the nutrition garden in their homes. It was decided that 29 children who would grow the nutrition garden in their homes particularly those who were economically disadvantaged, had their families run by single women, were keen to contribute by labour and building fences around the garden etc.



- In 6 schools, 84 children got involved to produce 35 kg mushroom in winter. The mid day meal was supplemented with the produce.
- The Child Parliament ministers and school students organized 11 rallys with 1122 children on gender equality, environment conservation etc.
- An animated video was developed as an awareness tool to spread information about the Child Parliament concept and process.

Direct Work

Youth Group-Boys	Youth group members-Boys	Youth Group-Girls	Youth group members-Girls	Children's Groups-Boys and Girls	Children's Groups Members-Boys	Children's Groups Members-Girls	Other Children	Total Groups	Total Members	Total Members+ other children
51	687	57	757	37	444 (176+268)	480 (205+275)	**3322**	**145**	**2368**	**5283**

Work with the Eco-system & Team

KR4: Enabled and strengthened eco-system and governance level around youth and children by creating better practices among institutions that affect the lives of youth, children and women particularly in the areas of gender issues, stopping gender-based violence and enhancing citizenship rights, promoting child development and protection, thus furthering child rights.
KR5: Increased ability of the EDF team to strengthen its team of local leaders and integrate gender and masculinity lens in all programme verticals.

Working with the Gram Panchayat, Political Leaders and Village Level Child Protection Committees

Samyo Mela (Equality Fair): Using a Partnership Approach for Collaborative Design & Implementation

We believe the first step to empowerment is active participation through partnerships. That is, partners will work together from the planning stage to reach the same goal, sharing the risks and benefits. Samya Mela, which is a tool to initiate broader dialogue with the larger community on Gender Equality through games and cultural activities was planned with the youth, the Nari jagaran Committees, the self help groups clusters, the Gram Panchayats and local leaders. We organized 3 Samyo Mela (Equity Fair) in the three districts of South 24 Paragana, Birbhum and Purulia. Directly we reach more than seven thousand people and indirectly approximately twenty five thousand people.

- 59 elected representatives actively participated from the planning stage of the Samyo Mela. They took responsibility to mobilize the newly elected panchayat members and schools, inviting government officials, taking permission from the police station. The gram panchayats organized lunch for 5700 people in the 3 districts and mobilized the community to take the responsibility of food preparation. They came forward to prepare the ground on the day for sports and actively managed the sport events.
- 26 political leaders and members of Gram Panchayat appointed 12 volunteers for cleaning the venue, make food arrangements, manage the lunch distributions, prepare the ground for sports, in South 24 Paraganas.
- 67 Youth boys and 49 girls gave leadership to mobilize their communities reaching out through tableau awareness, wall writings at village level, managing the stall, food distribution, stage management, conducting the rally, conducting the gender role reverse games, collecting funds for the Fair.
- 16 school teachers contributed Rs. 20000; conducting the sports events, mobilized the community to participate
- Fund collected by Nari Jagaran Committee, youth leader and Sangha group was more than Rs. 51,800.
- **The Fair became a community affair with the community contributing more than rupees one lakh eleven thousand towards it.**

Contribution in cash	
NJC, Sangha, Youth	**51800**
Gram Panchayat	**38200**
Teachers	**20000**
Total	**1,10,000**

Residential Workshop with Political leadership

Bikas Mahato, member of Nowahatu Gram Panchayat, village-Kachahatu, Purulia participated in a four days residential gender and leadership workshop with other political leaders and panchayat members, organized by Equidiversity Foundation. After returning from the training, he mobilized 15 women to join Nari Jagaran committee in his area; a youth group with 9 boys and a youth group with 11 girls. He approached the Purulia unit of Equidiversity Foundation, to conduct gender trainings, legal literacy and financial literacy sessions with these groups in his village. He took initiative in organizing an awareness camp on the Anti-Child Labor Day in Kachahatu Primary School premises, where about 90 people attended.

Says Bikas, "In my village, child marriages are high, youth are addicted to drugs from a young age, women are subjected to domestic violence and women in my village cannot read and write. So, I want to provide education to women, provide training so that women can earn, to make youth aware. If I can do this, I hope the people of my village will elect me again in the panchayat election.

A residential training on gender and collaborative leadership was organized for local political leaders and male representatives. 19 political leaders and male elected representative participated from four GPs of South 24 Paragana and Purulia by traveling to Kolkata. For the first time, the training was attended by the leaders of the ruling and two opposition parties and elected representatives of the people.

Inclusion of young voices in Gram Panchayat Development Plan

We believe in participatory bottom-up planning process. Our laws provide for such a process through community engagement in Gram Sangsad and Gram Sabhas. Only the voters of the area can participate in those meetings.

Legal requirement does not necessarily translate into political will to engage the public in such de-centralized planning process. We motivated Gram Panchayat in Birbhum to include young people below 18 years of age to share their issues and vision for their village. 251 boys and 407 girls of the same area conducted a total of 22 neighborhood meetings and recorded various problems of the area like communal-toilets;

SOME REFLECTION FROM THE POLITICAL LEADERS' WORKSHOP

"At first, I assumed that this training was about a certain political party. There was a fear in the mind that there might be trouble due to different opinions of different groups during the training, but no such situation happened. At the end of the training, I felt that if we can work in this way, then the development of the area will be possible".

"This is the first time in my life that I have experienced such a training on politics. Regardless of the leadership from any political party, the plans are not unique. I felt the need to change how we undertake planning. In the session where we created ideal villages and gram panchayats, I realized there is a big gap in our thoughts and understanding."

"During the planning of Gram Panchayat, only infrastructural planning is done, but this training I understood that the development of disabled children/people, oppressed women and overall development of children and women in the society should also be thought of, only then the development of Gram Panchayat will be at all levels".

cleaning of drains; construction of vats along various roads in the village; planting of trees along playgrounds and roadsides; police patrolling to ensure safety for girls; levelling of play ground; providing play equipment; organizing library for books for underprivileged children; wall writing and awareness camps to prevent child marriage etc.

Many of these ideas have found a place in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan for 2023-24.

- Although Panchayat Elections took place in June, the formation of different boards post- election got completed only in September. As a result, a lot of advocacy work with the Gram Panchayat and Village level Child Protection Committees got delayed. The VLCPCs are yet to be formed in many areas. Till March, we were able to work with only 8 VLCPCs and 102 members. In Purulia, 1 GLCPC (at the Gram Panahayat level) was formed with 25 members. 3 members from DSPU unit came to form this at the initiation of EDF.
- In Birbhum two VLCPCs managed to prevent 6 child marriages in their area. 4 child members of VLCPCs identified cases of child marriage and reported them to other adult members of the Committee. Members of VLCPC & Gram Panchayat stopped child marriages with the help of police administration. Counselling was provided by Equidiversity Foundation to the girls. The VLCPCs conducted 12 awareness camps in their areas including wall writing. 76 youths (41Girls & 35 Boy's), 125 Nari Jagaran Committee members participated actively to reach out to1258 people from the area - 500 women and 758 men.
- In Birbhum the Asha and ANMs (health staff) reached out to the EDF team to form a partnership to address early marriage and elopement in their meetings. In 26 such meetings, EDF and health workers dealt with the issue together reaching out to 242 adolescent girls.
- 6 cases involving the youth in matters of child labour, child marriage, POCSO, elopement, human trafficking were handled by VLCPCs and the survivors were rehabilitated.
- 8 two days workshops with 102 members of VLCPCs took place in Birbhum. The issues covered included thematic understanding on child rights and protection and roles and responsibilities.

Working with Colleges and Secondary Schools in Kolkata to embed gender

- **Pehchaan:** We started our work in Kolkata field as a newbie in the urban sector. After having few interactions in the community and political leadership here, it was felt that the only place where we can have a 'youth group' is the school. We brainstormed our entry point in a school within our team and decided on the concept of 'self-awareness' model on mental health, gender-equality, child protection, citizenship rights and social capital development. The pitching point was we would be complementing the present education system which gives very less or rather no space for emotional growth and social awareness building and will help the young minds create a better self-identity. We named this model "PEHCHAAN".
- We started our pilot work with 'Loreto House', Kolkata (Private Elite School) and organised a summer camp of 4 days on their request. They had 1 day orientation on the field followed by 1 day field visit where they interacted freely with our youth groups. The last 2 days were reflections of their field visit where they mainly talked about their astonishment on the different lifestyles same age groups have in rural & urban areas. The first day they had developed a list of privileges like good parents, having pocket money, having comfortable living etc. After the field visit almost all of them said that their idea of privileges has changed.
- As part of the next step, we conducted a baseline study with 123 people (91 youth in the age group of 13-21 years, 25 teachers, 20 parents) before we developed a curriculum that we intend to take to boys' and girls' schools and colleges.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the knowledge and attitudes of adolescents on self-awareness, gender equality, child rights, citizenship rights, reproductive health and mental health
- To understand the practices and behaviour of adolescents regarding the above issues
- To assess the perception of parents and teachers about the awareness and ease of today's youth in discussing the above issues.

Some Findings

- 84% did not understand the consequences of full openness in a relationship
- 64% think that setting boundaries about personal information is harmful in a relationship
- 74%) firmly rejected the idea that a man can beat his wife under any circumstances
- 26% girls in the age group of 14-17 years who are studying in Secondary School believed that it was okay for husbands to beat their wives
- 86%) were unaware of the helpline number that handles gender-based violence cases.
- 86% students do not acknowledge the importance of law enforcement agencies getting involved in addressing domestic abuse.
- 56% recommended for contacting an issue-specific helpline or support service
- Witnessing violence on children would encourage 58% of youth to report it to a helpline but interestingly, witnessing violence against a transperson would encourage youth to report the incident to a club.
- 56% students agreed that sufficient condition for marriage should not always depend on the employment status of the man. The majority of respondents, particularly girls and those in the 18 to 21 age group believe that an employed girl can take care of the finances and can marry an unemployed boy.
- In a changed situation where the unemployed man has found employment, 62 % respondents immediately felt that the man should not engage in the household work anymore.
- 54% respondents indicated that they have experienced some form of abuse.
- 74% girls reported facing abuse
- 60% of queer and trans respondents reported facing abuse

Partnering with others NGOs to mainstream gender in institutions like leather clusters in Bantala

- In collaboration with NGO Solidaridad, Equidiversity Foundation organized a series of workshops within the Kolkata leather clusters, focusing on gender sensitization to promote equality. Solidaridad is trying to promote gender equality in the workplaces of Kolkata Leather Complex, Bantala. The primary goal was to help participants distinguish between biological sex and socially constructed gender, fostering a deeper comprehension of prevalent gender biases. Using interactive exercises and open discussions, the workshops brought to light the pronounced discrepancies in gender roles, especially in daily routines and responsibilities. Incorporating visual aids, facilitators introduced pictorial exercises to illustrate gender disparities. Participants were presented with various activities depicted in images and asked to select and arrange them according to the daily clock, enhancing their understanding of unequal gender roles and fostering discussion on gender inequality in terms of labour and values assigned to it. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their gender-related experiences and emotions, revealing both positive and negative aspects of their gender identities. While conducting gender sessions with the male & female workers in the industry it was also felt that Solidaridad Team also needs to relook at their understanding of gender as a window for new opportunities. A sensitization session was planned for the discussion to take place. Till March'24, 183 participants of 9 leather companies were reached with only 15 participants being women. Another workshop was conducted with

around 23 "Worker Leaders" identified from the initial group sessions as motivated and having the capacity to understand and push change in their workplaces. The objective of this workshop was for the participants to have a deeper understanding about gender issues in the workplace and will develop empathy for women workers in their workplace and will be encourage to explore ways to change the factory environment for women. The gender sensitization workshops provided a crucial platform for meaningful discussions on gender equality within the Kolkata leather cluster. The aspiration is that the insights gained from these workshops will manifest into actionable initiatives, fostering gender equality not only within the leather cluster but also in society, ultimately nurturing a more inclusive and cooperative environment for all.

- We have been working deeply with NGO Calcutta Rescue run school to train 22 teachers (5 male, 17 female) on gender and mental health.

Direct Reach with Eco-system

Men's Groups (Political leaders)	Member	Teachers' Groups	Member	VLCPCs / GLCPC	Parents	Member	Bantala Leather Cluster	Members	Total Groups	Total Members
4	59+17 (women)	5	98	9	1288 (including 295 fathers)	127	9	183	**27**	**1772 (including 642 men)**

Working with Our Team

While our work is taking inroads within the community, our team on the field also needed to dig deeper within themselves.

- We organized 6 'Personal Growth' sessions with the team to help them understand self and each other more deeply & closely. Some objectives of the sessions:
  - Acknowledgement and acceptance of one's own fear, anger, anxiety and other disturbing emotions.
  - Letting it go and feeling free
  - Building self esteem
  - Appreciating oneself
  - Identifying the limitations or areas of deficiency within self. Identifying the ways to overcome them.
  - Anger management
  - Importance and principal of feedback. Realizing the importance of giving feedback properly and receiving it to improve oneself.
- Some team members were referred for personal counselling on recommendation from the facilitator. 9 team members went through repeated counselling sessions to manage their emotions and situation at home and workplace.
- 45 study circles were conducted on various issues ranging from handling cases, skill building on sessions etc.
- 29 team members went for a Retreat and Team Building process in Jhandi, uphill of West Bengal. We also conducted an annual planning exercise to review our work and roles and build our professional journey maps.
- Two of our community leaders got recognition by Sewa Bharat, West Bengal for their contribution to the community.

Challenges

Challenges are part of our daily routine when we are working with men and boys. Most difficult is to prevent drop out due to socio-economic conditions of the families we work with. We strongly felt that as these adolescents went through their own journeys of dealing with challenges like finding a vocation of their choice, finding a partner, negotiating with the family, finding own identity etc, this was in reality the most difficult phase where they will be able to focus on new ideas. We have found a range of mental health issues among adolescents starting from depression to suicides and addiction amongst the youth. For girls, elopements and early marriage were "escape routes" to address the difficult life situations at their natal family.

Also, we found young men & boys are more comfortable in casual discussions than formal sessions. Access to sports, computers and internet are some of the needs they voice out regularly. Also, mobile addiction is a generalised problem but mostly with boys.

The present challenge is to help the youth negotiate between with their individual needs and group needs. For eg; while group need is to help stop VAW and also to create a positive strong identity but in many cases individual need is to start earning to support family or to feel loved and appreciated. Also, there is a very big gap between available resources and opportunities to explore. The youth, irrespective of their sex, have no aspiration for their own selves other than earning or marriage which seems inevitable and binding to them. They are unable to take the pressure from the family and unable to negotiate are forcing them to take the route of elopement, child marriage or school drop-out.

Exploring non masculine vocations for boys becomes a challenge. The political leadership is also busy negotiating own power related anxieties and challenging social norms is perceived as an uphill task. We are exploring ways to look at career readiness for youth as a way ahead to enable them to build aspirations.

Climate change impacts like heat waves, natural calamities are frequently causing disruptions in our work plan.

We also had 29 girl members of our groups (10%) eloping underage. We will conduct a study to understand this phenomenon more. The larger issue of creating agency among youth leaders to rise above social pressure and challenge social norms is time taking and slow. More support and programmatic innovation are necessary to address such a complex issue.