

EQUIDIVERSITY FOUNDATION
Promoting Equity in Diversity

WORKING WITH MEN & BOYS: YOUTH DRIVEN INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS GENDER INEQUALITY & VIOLENCE IN BIRBHUM, SOUTH 24 PARGANAS, PURULIA & KOLKATA

2025-2026: A Narrative Report

Executive Summary

The Equidiversity Foundation (EDF) programme works to build gender-sensitive communities and responsive local ecosystems by engaging adolescents, youth, children, and key stakeholders across rural West Bengal. Moving beyond awareness-based interventions, EDF's approach is rooted in shifting norms, power relations, and institutional practices—recognising that sustainable gender justice requires change at both individual and systemic levels.

During the reporting period, EDF directly engaged 3,770 individuals across multiple districts, strengthening two core pillars:
(1) agency, leadership, and critical consciousness among young people, and
(2) an enabling ecosystem through families, schools, women's collectives, and governance institutions

What Changed

Beyond Participation to Power and Legitimacy

A defining shift has been the emergence of children and youth as legitimate civic actors, not merely programme participants. Through platforms such as Child Parliaments, youth groups, and the Ichhedana Fellowship, young people increasingly engaged with Gram Panchayats, schools, and protection systems—raising issues of safety, education, gender-based violence, and infrastructure. This resulted not only in visible actions (such as prevention of child marriages and community campaigns), but also in a reconfiguration of who is seen as capable of leadership within communities

Girls demonstrated a profound transition—from silence and hesitation to voice, negotiation, and collective action. Through safe spaces, self-defense workshops, and leadership opportunities, girls began articulating experiences of violence, claiming public spaces, and influencing community decisions. Their leadership in sports, community campaigns, and peer mobilisation reflects a growing normalization of girls' visibility and agency.

Work with boys revealed equally important, though more complex, shifts. There is evidence of behavioural change in everyday gender relations—including reduced harassment, greater acceptance of girls' mobility, and boys questioning dominant norms of masculinity. Boys increasingly expressed emotions, reflected on power, and even led initiatives on menstrual awareness and child protection. However, these changes exist alongside structural tensions. For many boys, especially those above 17, gender-equitable values are not always experienced as viable due to economic pressure, livelihood insecurity, and conflicting social expectations of masculinity

This highlights a critical insight: attitudinal change alone is insufficient without enabling conditions that make equitable choices socially and economically viable**.**

Youth Leadership as a Driver of Systems Change

Youth leadership has evolved into a key pathway for scale and sustainability. Adolescents and youth not only organized 48 para meetings, 18 awareness camps, and environmental campaigns, but also engaged directly with institutions to influence decisions and mobilise communities. Their role in preventing child marriages, addressing violence, and shaping local development plans demonstrates a shift from awareness to accountable action.

The Ichhedana Fellowship further validated youth as change-makers, enabling fellows to design and implement community-based projects across themes such as gender, education, environment, and child protection. The fellowship's success lies in combining mentorship, resources, and institutional exposure—demonstrating that when youth leadership is scaffolded, it creates multiplier effects and sustained community impact

Strengthening the Ecosystem: From Awareness to Collective Accountability

EDF's ecosystem approach has deepened engagement with families, women's groups, schools, and governance systems. Nari Jagaran Committees have enabled women to move from individual experiences of violence to collective voice, case response, and community leadership. Similarly, Village Level Child Protection Committees and Panchayat engagement have strengthened local accountability systems, contributing to the prevention of child marriage and improved child protection responses.

Work with teachers has begun contributing to a shift in school culture—from discipline-focused approaches to empathetic, inclusive, and child-centered practices. Child Parliaments have further embedded democratic participation within schools, allowing children to influence decision-making and institutional processes.

Large-scale platforms such as Samya Mela have demonstrated the power of shared ownership by bringing together thousands of

community members in a collective reflection on rights, equality, and coexistence. The process of co-creation, including shared financial and organisational responsibility, reflects a deeper shift toward community-led change rather than externally driven interventions

Overall Impact and Strategic Learning

The programme has contributed to layered change across individual, relational, and institutional levels:

- Young people increasingly see themselves—and are seen by others—as leaders and decision-makers
- Girls are claiming voice, mobility, and public presence with growing confidence
- Boys are beginning to question and renegotiate masculinity, though within structural constraints
- Communities are shifting from silence to dialogue and collective action on violence and rights
- Institutions are becoming more responsive to youth voices and gender concerns

At the same time, EDF's experience highlights a critical strategic learning: gender justice must be linked with dignity, livelihood, and belonging for it to be sustainable.

This calls for a deeper integration of gender work with economic aspirations, peer support systems, and digital realities—ensuring that equitable identities are not only understood but also lived as viable and respected choices.

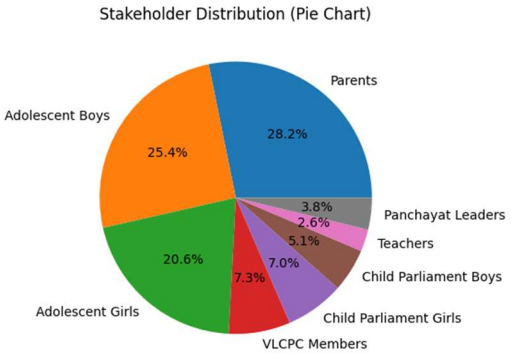
We worked directly and intensely with 3,770 people in our communities in this reporting period

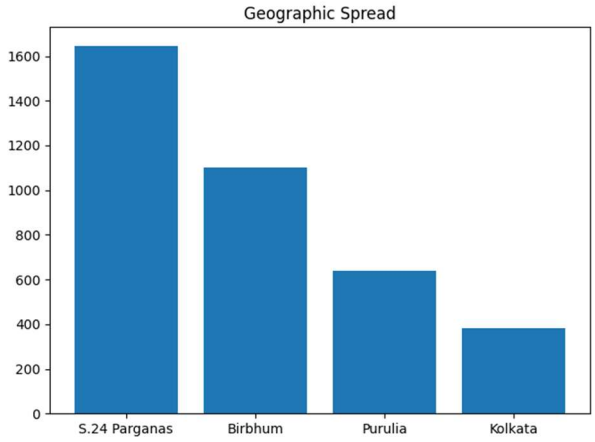
Stakeholders	Birbhum	Purulia	Kolkata	Total	% of Total Members	Birbhum Groups	S.24 P Groups	Purulia Groups	Kolkata Groups	Total Groups
Adolescent Boys	211	135	328	956	25.4%	17	10	12	1	40
Adolescent Girls	227	175	41	777	20.6%	18	11	16	1	46
Child Parliament Boys	97	26	0	194	5.1%	–	–	–	–	–
Child Parliament Girls	128	22	0	263	7.0%	–	–	–	–	–
Parents	228	185	0	1063	28.2%	–	–	–	–	–
Teachers	28	10	15	99	2.6%	–	–	–	–	–
VLCPC Members	95	66	0	276	7.3%	–	–	–	–	–
Panchayat Members & Opinion Leaders	88	18	0	142	3.8%	–	–	–	–	–
TOTAL	1102	637	384	3770	100%					

The programme demonstrates strong depth of engagement, with over 46% of participants being adolescents, indicating a focused investment in long-term norm change through youth leadership. At the same time, the significant inclusion of parents, community institutions, and governance actors (over 41%) reflects a deliberate ecosystem approach—ensuring that individual behaviour change is reinforced and sustained through supportive social and institutional structures.

This phase of the programme highlights an important insight: While boys are increasingly adopting gender-equitable values, sustaining these shifts requires linking them with aspiration, dignity, and livelihood opportunities.

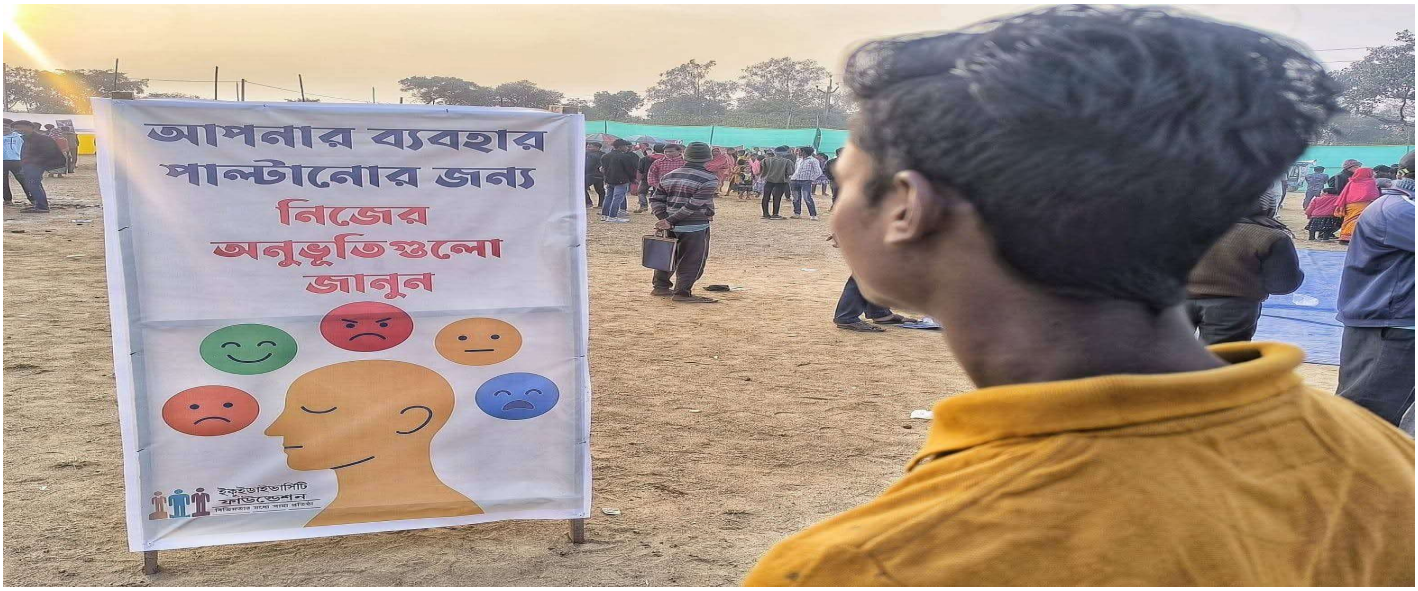
Amit Mahato, 24, left home after completing his secondary education to work as a construction labourer in Bangalore. Like many young boys, he was driven by aspirations of earning, building a house, and achieving financial independence. However, over four years, he experienced long working hours, low wages, and exploitation, with little recognition or growth—forcing him to confront the harsh realities of early migration.
After returning home, Amit engaged with EDF's sessions and community processes, which led to a significant shift in his thinking. He chose to re-enter education and is now enrolled in college, rebuilding his pathway with a stronger sense of purpose and dignity.
Through the Ichhedana Fellowship, Amit has translated his experience into community action. He is actively working to prevent early migration among adolescent boys—raising awareness, engaging families, and advocating with the Gram Panchayat to track and support minors at risk. His efforts include pushing for systems such as migration registers to ensure accountability and protection.





Conclusion

EDF's work demonstrates that meaningful social change is not linear. It requires long-term engagement, trust-building, and shared power across communities and institutions. When young people are supported with safe spaces, mentorship, and opportunities for leadership, and when ecosystems evolve alongside them—communities begin to shift not only what they believe, but who holds power and whose voices shape the future.



Detailed Narration

Strategic Objective

Equidiversity Foundation seeks to enable a gender-sensitive community and a gender-responsive eco-system in rural contexts by working with adolescents, youth, children, and community stakeholders to challenge gender norms, strengthen leadership, and promote inclusive participation. This will be achieved by enabling youth, adolescents, and community members to—

- Create safe and inclusive spaces where adolescents and youth can openly express their thoughts, experiences, and challenges related to gender, relationships, and social expectations.
- Challenge rigid gender roles by promoting shared responsibilities, where both boys and girls engage in diverse roles across household, social, and leadership spaces.
- Build awareness and collective action against child marriage, gender-based violence, and discrimination through dialogue, community engagement, and youth-led initiatives.
- Strengthen leadership skills among adolescents and youth, enabling them to take ownership of community initiatives such as Samya Mela, awareness campaigns, and social action programs.
- Promote participation of women, girls, and marginalized groups in public spaces and decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.
- Encourage behavioural and attitudinal change among parents and community members to support adolescents' education, mobility, and rights.
- Foster collaboration between different community groups (youth, child groups, women's groups) to build a supportive network for social change.

Program Design

The project is anchored in two interlinked components that together enable individual transformation and systemic change:

A. Strengthening Agency and Leadership among Children, Adolescents, and Youth. This component focuses on building critical awareness, life skills, and leadership among young people, enabling them to question norms and take informed action. To break it further, the design encompasses the following goals:

1. *Develop a deeper understanding of gender, relationships, and rights, enabling adolescents and youth to critically challenge harmful practices such as child marriage and restrictions on mobility.*
2. *Build confidence, communication, and self-expression, particularly among girls, so they can articulate their experiences and take on leadership roles.*
3. *Foster empathy and mutual respect among boys and girls, encouraging collaboration and breaking rigid gender stereotypes in everyday spaces.*
4. *Enable youth to emerge as community leaders, actively planning and leading initiatives such as Samya Mela, Haat Sabha, and other social action platforms.*
5. *Institutionalize children's leadership through Child Parliaments (Shishu Sansad), nurturing democratic values, responsibility, and early leadership.*
6. *Support adolescents and youth to continue education and reduce dropout, through sustained engagement, counselling, and community-based support systems.*

B. Building a Supportive Ecosystem. This component strengthens the wider social and institutional environment to sustain gender equality and youth development outcomes. The design tries to focus more to-

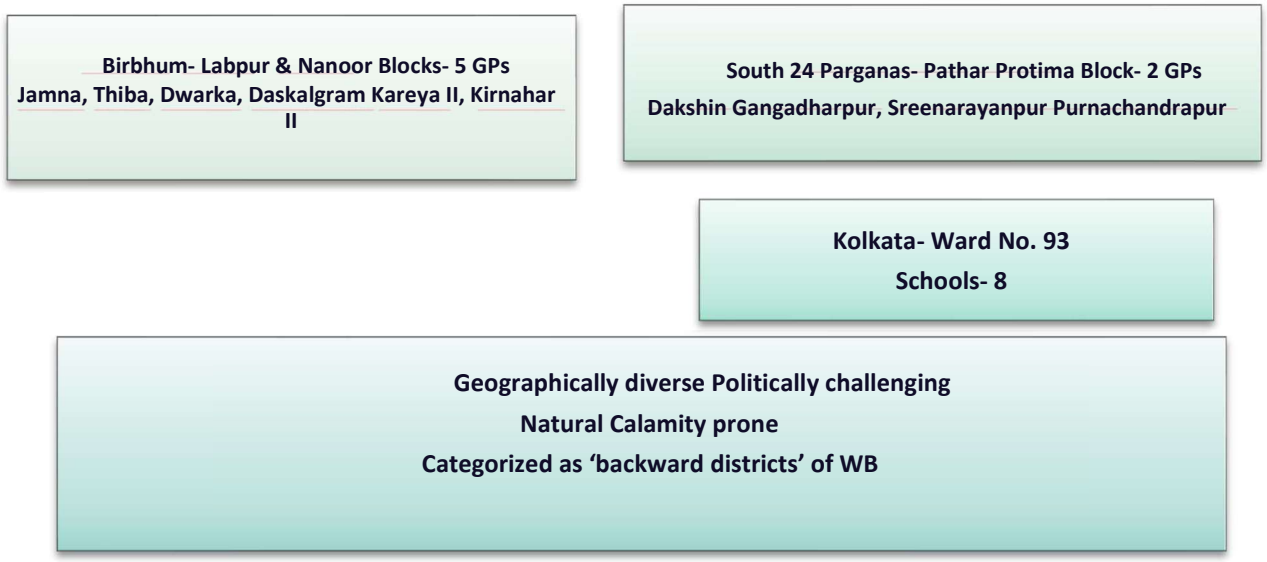
1. *Align with collective platforms such as Nari Jagaran Committees, enabling women and girls to voice concerns, build solidarity, and take leadership in addressing gender issues.*
2. *Engage parents through dialogue to shift restrictive norms around adolescents' behaviour, education, and mobility, promoting more supportive caregiving practices.*
3. *Partner with schools and teachers to integrate sessions on gender, child rights, mental health, digital behaviour, and life skills, contributing to more inclusive learning environments.*

4. *Collaborate with Gram Panchayats and local leaders to address child marriage, gender-based violence, and inclusive development, strengthening institutional accountability.*
5. *Build linkages across youth groups, child groups, and village level child protection committees to enable coordinated, community-led action.*
6. *Facilitate community awareness through participatory platforms such as Gram Sabhas, Shishu Sabhas, rallies, campaigns, and Samya Mela, ensuring wider engagement and dialogue.*
7. *Strengthen community-based reporting and response systems for violence and child rights violations by building trust and awareness.*
8. *Promote local ownership and sustainability, encouraging community contributions—both financial and participatory—and shared responsibility for ongoing initiatives.*

Approach

In this project, while gender remains a cross-cutting theme, the overall approach integrates mental well-being, safe spaces, and participatory learning, ensuring that individuals not only gain knowledge but also experience personal transformation and collective empowerment.

Project areas during this reporting period:



- 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.

Boys Deepening Their Leadership Journey

Now in its third year, the programme has moved beyond introducing ideas to deepening change and ownership. Many adolescent boys had already been part of the journey; this year reflects how sustained engagement translates into behaviour, leadership, and life choices.

Across 40 groups, 956 boys continued their engagement through structured sessions, safe spaces, and community action. What began as conversations on gender and equality is now visible in everyday behaviour:

- Emotional expression is more accepted—boys increasingly recognise that vulnerability is not weakness
- Anger and control are being questioned, with greater emphasis on empathy and dialogue
- Girls' participation in public spaces is not only accepted but actively supported
- Boys are engaging with issues such as menstrual health, violence, and equality with greater openness

Leadership Beyond the Group

Youth leadership is extending into community and governance spaces:

- 92 youth mobilised 864 adolescents through para meetings
- 18 youth-led awareness camps reached 1,865 community members
- Youth engaged with Gram Panchayats by identifying issues and submitting development plans

The shift is from individual learning → to collective action and systems engagement.

The shift is moving from awareness → to lived practice.

This year reflects a phase of consolidation in how boys engage with the programme, strengthening and deepening practices built over time. Boys are consistently reviving and sustaining groups through sports and peer mobilisation, leading environmental campaigns and plastic collection drives, and planning events such as Bon Mahotsav in coordination with local institutions. They are also taking increasing responsibility in camps—mobilising children, managing logistics, and facilitating activities. This sustained engagement demonstrates that boys are not only participating but are steadily functioning as organisers, facilitators, and emerging leaders, generating grounded evidence on what enables meaningful youth leadership.

At the same time, safe spaces created through camps and structured discussions are reinforcing boys' ability to reflect on their lived realities. They are more openly sharing experiences of pressure, neglect, and violence, identifying trusted support systems, and building awareness of rights, emotional well-being, and care. This consolidation marks a deepening shift—from silence to articulation, and from articulation to awareness—informing an evidence-based approach that centres reflection as a critical pathway to sustained behavioural and social change

Rajkumar Maity Chooses Education with Clarity

"I have been part of the Taranagar Youth Group since 2023. In June 2025, I decided on my own to leave school and start working, as I had lost interest in studies and wanted to earn money to buy a vehicle.

At first, work felt fine, but soon I began to feel suffocated. The long hours of hard labour left no time for rest or play, and I deeply missed school and my friends. At the workplace, I had little freedom, and my opinions did not matter. Because of my age, I was also not considered for better opportunities.

During this time, I realised that education is essential for a better future. A proper qualification not only opens up better job opportunities and higher income but also creates possibilities to work beyond local contexts. I understood that both education and the right age are important for securing dignified work.

I decided to return home and re-enrol in school. Now, I am committed to completing my Higher Secondary education. I also want to share this with others in my group—that education should come first, and work should be taken up only after reaching adulthood."

Leadership is about allyship and collective action

his year reflects a consolidation of youth leadership, with adolescents engaging more consistently as active contributors to community processes. Both boys and girls demonstrated increased confidence in taking initiative, mobilising peers, and addressing

local issues through collective action. Rather than isolated participation, their engagement is now more structured, intentional, and increasingly linked to community-level outcomes.

A strong example emerged from Das Kalgram Koreya-II Gram Panchayat, where an adolescent girls' group formed a football team inspired by the Thiba Women's Football Team. What made this initiative significant was the role of boys as allies—two adolescent boys, Pathik Das and Shubho Das, stepped in as coaches and mentors. They mobilised local support by approaching a teacher, Shri Harekrishna Bhowmik, who provided footballs and jerseys. The team went on to participate in Samya Mela and International Women's Day events, securing awards and visibly challenging gender norms around girls' participation in sports.

At scale, 92 youth leaders mobilised 864 adolescents and youth across villages, organising 48 para meetings to identify local issues and co-create solutions. These processes led to the development and submission of village-level plans to Gram Panchayats, indicating a growing understanding of governance systems and youth participation in decision-making. Youth also demonstrated analytical capacity by mapping patterns of vulnerability—such as child marriage, substance abuse, and domestic violence—and designing targeted awareness interventions.

Building on this, youth independently organised 18 awareness camps, reaching 1,865 community members on critical issues including child protection and gender-based violence. These initiatives were fully facilitated by youth, reflecting a clear shift towards ownership. Overall, these processes show that adolescents are not only building leadership skills but are also applying them in real contexts—identifying problems, designing responses, and engaging with institutions—laying a strong foundation for sustained, community-led change.

Shift: From passive acceptance → to active allyship in challenging gender norms

Leaders with an intersectional lens

Youth leadership is increasingly reflecting an intersectional understanding of how environmental concerns are closely linked to local community realities. During the year, 17 adolescents led *Bon Mahotsav* campaigns across seven Gram Panchayats, planting over 500 saplings, raising awareness on ecological conservation, and collaborating with the Forest Department. These efforts positioned youth not just as participants, but as active responders to environmental challenges affecting their communities.

This approach was further demonstrated through a locally driven response to the spread of parthenium. On the occasion of Independence Day, adolescents organized a large-scale eradication drive across two Gram Panchayats, covering two football fields and a 3 km roadside stretch. The initiative brought together adolescent boys and girls, Child Parliament members, and NJC members, working collectively to address a health and environmental hazard. These actions highlight how youth are identifying local issues, mobilizing across groups, and taking ownership of solutions that directly impact community well-being.

Strategic Interventions to Strengthen Leadership

EDF's approach to strengthening youth leadership this year focused on deepening practice through context-responsive and evidence-based interventions. In Kolkata, the *"Bondho Dorja Kholo"* campaign was designed in response to a key structural challenge—the limited time, mobility, and safe spaces available for women to engage on issues of violence and inequality. Grounded in community insights, the campaign adopted a decentralised, door-to-door model, enabling youth to engage nearly 200 individuals across diverse age groups and occupations. These conversations surfaced critical patterns: while a majority expressed support for gender equality in domestic roles, a significant proportion still normalised or remained silent on gender-based violence, often due to fear or its perception as a private matter. The findings also highlighted the importance of collective action, as many respondents indicated they were more willing to speak up when supported by a group rather than individually.

Rahul Das, from Dhrubabati village under Jamna Gram Panchayat, has been part of the adolescent group from a young age. Through regular participation in sessions—especially on mental health—he not only absorbed learnings but began applying them in his daily life. His growing sense of responsibility was reflected both at home, where he supported his parents in agricultural and household work, and in the way his parents recognised positive changes in his behaviour.

Rahul's turning point came when he witnessed younger children in his community being pushed into early marriage. Disturbed by this, he chose to act. Through the Ichhedana Fellowship, he mobilised peers and younger adolescents, organised awareness meetings across neighbourhoods, and mapped areas with a higher incidence of child marriage. He shared these insights with the Gram Panchayat to support targeted interventions.
Going a step further, Rahul reported cases to the Child Helpline and successfully intervened to prevent five child marriages.

Building on these insights, adolescents led the consolidation of community voices into a collective event attended by 150 people, creating an inclusive platform for dialogue through

interactive activities and shared reflection. Youth played a central role in designing and facilitating the process—mobilising households, shaping messaging, and ensuring participation across genders and age groups. The campaign not only enabled conversations on gender, violence, and inclusion (including emerging awareness on LGBTQ+ rights and social discrimination), but also informed a clear direction for future interventions—such as the need for community-based safety networks, safe reporting spaces, and sustained behaviour change efforts. This demonstrates how youth-led processes are not only driving engagement but also generating grounded evidence to inform adaptive, community-led strategies for change.

Leadership was further strengthened through structured opportunities that translated learning into action. 33 adolescents independently managed a residential camp for 133 children, while 14 young people intervened in 28 cases of child marriage, demonstrating the ability to take responsibility in high-stakes situations. Community processes such as Haat Sabhas enabled youth to facilitate dialogue with parents and build collective accountability around child protection.

The *Ichhedana Fellowship*, now in its second year, reflects a critical phase of consolidation and application of learning. Building on insights from the first cycle, the fellowship strengthened its selection, mentoring, and implementation processes, enabling youth to more effectively design and lead community-based interventions across themes such as gender, environment, and child protection. With 22 out of 28 fellows successfully completing the cycle, the model demonstrates both depth and sustainability. At this stage, Ichhedana is no longer a pilot—it is a tested, adaptive platform for nurturing grassroots leadership and is now ready for scale.

Strengthening Leadership and Personal Capital among Adolescent Girls

While the programme is anchored in masculinities and working with boys, engaging adolescent girls has been a deliberate systems-level strategy over the past three years. Patriarchy operates through relationships and shared social norms—impacting girls directly while also shaping boys' behaviours. Working with girls alongside boys has enabled us to understand how shifts in boys' attitudes translate into changes in girls' lived realities, and how both can act as allies in building more equitable communities. Over time, this has evolved into an evidence-informed approach to strengthening relational leadership and collective agency.

Within this framework, EDF focused on building the personal and collective capital of adolescent girls—strengthening confidence, voice, decision-making, and their ability to act within and beyond their immediate environments. Across the year, sustained engagement through structured sessions, group meetings, and focused inputs on gender and rights created spaces for girls to reflect, question norms, and build leadership rooted in lived experience.

Building Inner Agency

Safe spaces and structured processes enabled girls to begin articulating experiences that were often silenced. This is reflected in Rakhi Mahanta's journey. A quiet and soft-spoken adolescent from Nandanpur, Rakhi had witnessed violence at home and faced harassment on her way to school but hesitated to speak, fearing consequences for her education. Through her engagement with the group and later the fellowship, she began to find her voice. Despite initial resistance from the community due to her age, Rakhi persisted—working with women to plan safety measures, facilitating the installation of street lighting through the Gram Panchayat, and advocating for safer school routes. Her journey reflects a critical shift: from fear and silence to articulation, action, and civic engagement. As she shares, *"I want to ensure that girls like me can feel safe in education and workplaces."*

Similarly, processes such as Wenlido workshops enabled girls to move from hesitation to confidence—articulating boundaries, sharing experiences of violence, and taking collective action when needed. These shifts demonstrate that personal capital is built through repeated opportunities to reflect, express, and act.

Expanding Leadership Identity: From Self to Family and Community

Leadership among girls is increasingly extending beyond the self into family and community spaces. Leadership development extended beyond individual confidence to public expression and collective action. In Das Kalgram Koreya-II Gram Panchayat, adolescent girls formed a football team—challenging gender norms around mobility and visibility. Supported by boys as allies and local institutions, the team not only participated in public competitions but also claimed space traditionally denied to them. Environmental and community initiatives further strengthened this leadership identity, with adolescents organising campaigns, mobilising stakeholders, and addressing local issues. These experiences enabled girls to build decision-making, negotiation, teamwork, and public engagement skills—while also creating opportunities for boys and girls to collaborate as allies in challenging

norms.

Relational Leadership: Building Allies and Shared Change

The integration of girls within a masculinities programme has also enabled the emergence of relational leadership, where boys and girls influence and support each other's journeys. Whether through shared community initiatives, sports, or collective problem-solving, these interactions are fostering mutual respect, allyship, and accountability—key to sustaining gender-transformative change.



From Confidence to Sustained Leadership-Across these processes, girls are moving from silence to voice, from hesitation to action, and from participation to leadership. At the same time, the year reinforces a critical learning: these gains require continuity. Girls themselves emphasised the need for ongoing engagement and practice to retain and deepen their learning.

Strengthening personal capital is not a one-time outcome—it is a sustained process. Investing in safe spaces, mentorship, and opportunities for real-world action remains essential to ensuring that confidence translates into long-term leadership and systemic change.

Strengthening Child Parliaments: A Systems Story

Over the years, our work with Child Parliaments has evolved from introducing a model to strengthening a living system of child leadership within schools and communities.

In 2025–26, this system deepened across 24 schools, with 182 child ministers and 333 members actively practicing democracy—not as a concept, but as a lived experience. Children conducted elections, took on roles, and began engaging with real issues such as gender, health, safety, and rights. What emerged was not just student participation, but a shift in how schools functioned as democratic spaces.

This shift did not remain within classrooms. As children stepped into leadership roles, they began influencing teachers, families, and local governance. When children shared their ideas in meetings with Gram Panchayats, systems began to respond—resulting in tangible changes like improved water facilities, toilets, kitchens, and school infrastructure.

Exposure visits to Gram Panchayats and waste management systems further connected children to real-world governance and sustainability practices, helping them see themselves as part of a larger ecosystem. They were no longer passive learners—they became active contributors to community problem-solving.

At the same time, teachers started recognizing children as thinkers and decision-makers. This created a feedback loop: as adults listened more, children engaged more; as children engaged more, institutions became more responsive.

Even initiatives like mushroom cultivation became part of this ecosystem approach—linking leadership, nutrition, sustainability, and collective responsibility. Children worked together, made decisions, and carried learning back into their homes and communities.

What is emerging is a connected ecosystem of practice:

- Schools becoming spaces of democracy
- Children acting as leaders and change agents
- Teachers shifting from authority to facilitators

- Local governance responding to children's voices
- Communities engaging with children as stakeholders

This journey shows that Child Parliament is not just a program. It is a **systems intervention**—where strengthening relationships between children, institutions, and communities creates pathways for sustained, collective change.

How the System Is Responding and Growing

The strength of the Child Parliament model lies not in isolated moments of change, but in how different parts of the ecosystem begin to respond, connect, and act together.

Rumi Bagdi's story is one such example. Through the *Moner Kotha Baksho* (Feelings Box), a space created within schools for anonymous expression, a concern around domestic violence surfaced. At first, it was just a message—without a name. But the system did not stop there. Children, as active participants in this ecosystem, began observing changes in their peers. They noticed one of their friends withdrawing—becoming quiet, isolated, and physically unwell.

When this was shared during a session, it triggered a collective response. Teachers, facilitators, and peers came together to understand the situation. Through careful conversations, the child—Rumi—was identified and supported. What emerged was not just a case of emotional distress, but also an unmet health need and a context of violence at home.

From that point, the response extended across the ecosystem:

- EDF provided counseling support
- Teachers provided emotional support
- Parents were engaged through dialogue and follow-ups
- Access to healthcare was ensured
- Child Parliament members participated in follow-up and home visits

Over time, not only did Rumi's health improve, but instances of violence at home reduced. Today, she is not just recovered—she is participating, leading, and shaping the same system that supported her, having contested in school elections and stepping into leadership.

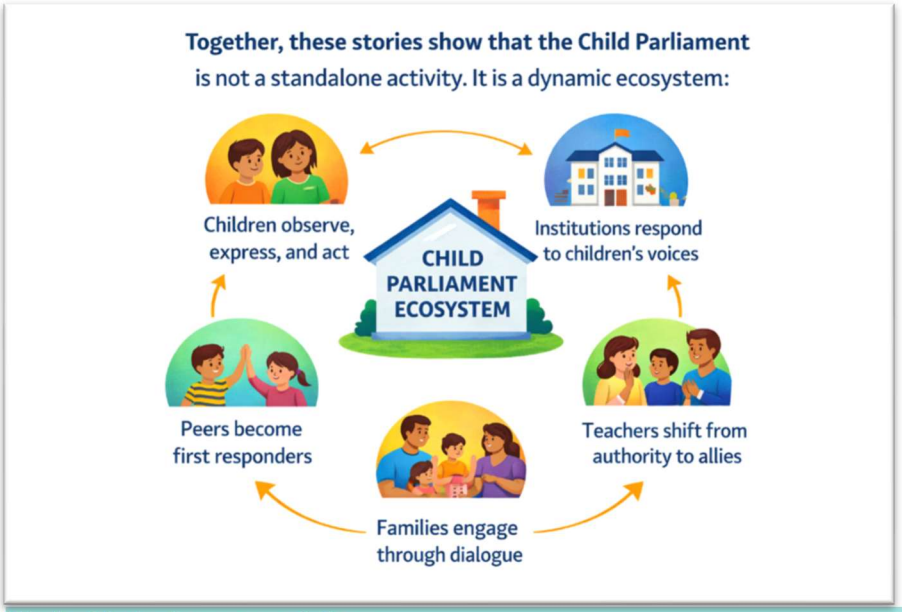
Her journey reflects how systems of care emerge when children, schools, and families are connected through trust and action.

Rritam Haldar's story reflects another dimension of this ecosystem—how children become agents of change within and beyond the school

Coming from a context where education was valued but physical well-being was often overlooked, Pritam entered the Child Parliament and gradually took on leadership roles—from Food Minister to Sports and Cultural Minister. But more importantly, he began to shape the agenda.

When asked what children needed, he spoke about physical exercise- yoga in particular not just for himself, but for everyone. The system responded. Space was created and special classes were assigned. And what began as an idea became a regular, collective practice led by children themselves.

Today, Rritam not only practices with his peers but ensures that the knowledge is shared and sustained—so that even if he leaves, others will continue. His leadership extends into his home as well, where he has taken on responsibilities and influenced everyday practices. His aspiration to become a police officer is rooted in what he sees around him—violence against women—and his desire to change it.



Change here is not linear. It moves through relationships, feedback loops, and shared responsibility.

What we are witnessing is the strengthening of a community of practice—where children are not just beneficiaries, but leaders, connectors, and catalysts of systemic change.

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.

Strengthening an Ecosystem Response: Building a Community of Practice

From Awareness to Collective Response on Domestic Violence

The domestic violence awareness training in Patharpratima was not designed as a one-off intervention, but as a catalytic node within a broader, evolving ecosystem of actors committed to gender justice. Bringing together 35 participants—including members of the Nari Jagaran Committee (NJC), Self-Help Groups, youth, and parents—the training created a shared learning space that deepened collective understanding and strengthened linkages across community structures.

Using participatory tools such as Meena story posters and Phulbanti's narrative, the session enabled participants to collectively unpack the multiple dimensions of violence—physical, emotional, and economic—and situate them within lived realities of patriarchy. More importantly, it positioned domestic violence not as an individual issue, but as a systemic concern requiring coordinated community response.

A key shift observed was the emergence of a shared language and analysis across stakeholders. Participants began to see their roles not in isolation, but as part of a wider support ecosystem—where survivors can speak up, peers can offer solidarity, and community-based groups like NJCs can act as first responders and referral points. 36 awareness programmes were organized by youth in their communities and 5 by VLCPCs.

Case Response as a System Function

Over the past year, the ecosystem has collectively responded to:

- 74 cases of domestic violence
- 58 cases of child marriage

Of these the youth intervened to stop 28 cases of child marriage

Strengthening a Community of Practice: VLCPC as Living Systems

The 22 child marriages prevented by VLCPCs signal more than successful interventions—they reflect a growing community of practice, where prevention is decentralized, collective, and sustained.

Village Level Child Protection Committees are emerging as active nodes in this ecosystem, bringing together Anganwadi workers, teachers, women's groups, youth, and local leaders to identify risks and respond together.

Nilima Mondal, an Anganwadi worker from Thiba, embodies this shift. Where she once felt helpless, she now acts with confidence—working with the committee, Child Helpline, and police to stop child marriages. Her journey shows how agency is strengthened through collective support.

Meera Haldar's experience echoes this transformation. From facing silence and restriction within her home, she now works with the Nari Jagaran Committee to prevent child marriage, drawing on shared knowledge, peer networks, and institutional support when challenges arise.

In Balarampur, local leader Mahim Mallik used the VLCPC platform to identify 26 at-risk girls and mobilize a coordinated response—bringing together frontline workers, community groups, and children for awareness and action. Mahim Mallik said, "Child marriage is a major problem in my area—I am well aware of it. However, being involved in politics, I would have faced many obstacles if I tried to address it alone. With EDF by my side, I was able to accomplish this significant work."

Across these efforts, a clear shift is visible:

- Action is collective, not individual
- Knowledge is shared, not isolated
- Responsibility is community-owned

Through 21 active VLCPCs, child protection is becoming an embedded community practice, sustained by relationships, coordination, and continuous learning.

Engaging Schools as Ecosystem Partners

Recognizing schools as critical institutions within the community ecosystem, the programme has worked with 86 teachers through sustained engagement, workshops, and reflective spaces—strengthening their role as educators and ecosystem actors.

The expansion of teacher engagement—initiated by School Inspectors—signals institutional uptake and system-level scaling. Moving beyond 10 schools to 16 schools and 19 teachers reflects how ecosystem strengthening enables replication and ownership within formal structures.

The teacher workshops focused on:

- Positive discipline
- Mental health and psychosocial well-being
- Empathy and communication
- Understanding child development (Erikson's framework)

These were not top-down trainings, but spaces of reflective practice, where teachers examined their own beliefs, shared experiences, and learned from one another.

Towards the end of the year, *Parichay* was conceived as a cross-district forum to further strengthen this emerging community of practice. Bringing together teachers from Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, and Birbhum, it created a dedicated space for dialogue on gender, mental health, and digital citizenship. Teachers reflected on the changing realities of adolescents—particularly the influence of social media—and the need to adapt their approaches.

Across these engagements, a clear shift is visible:

- Moving from control to empathy

- Recognizing children's agency
- Addressing everyday discrimination
- Integrating mental health into education
- Practicing accountability in relationships with children

Through ongoing engagement and spaces like Parichay, teachers are beginning to see themselves not just as instructors, but as **co-**learners within a larger ecosystem—shaping more inclusive, responsive, and supportive learning environments

Leadership Within the Ecosystem:

In his classroom, Prashanta Das does things a little differently. He listens. He creates space for children to speak, participate, and engage without fear or competition. Through activities and the Children's Parliament, students begin to experience voice, choice, and shared responsibility. When some parents grew concerned—mistaking this for political influence—Prashanta didn't push back. He reached out. Through conversations, he built understanding, showing that participation is about confidence, responsibility, and growth.

In doing so, he became a bridge—between school and home, children and community. As he reflects, "Participation is crucial for holistic development." His journey shows that real change doesn't come from instruction alone, but through relationships, dialogue, and collective trust.

Samya Mela: A Community of Practice in Action

Samya Mela (Festival of Equality) has evolved beyond an annual event into a living community of practice—where diverse actors come together to learn, reflect, and act on shared values of equality and justice.

Over four years, the mela has been co-created by Gram Panchayats, Nari Jagaran Committees, youth groups, teachers, and community volunteers. What makes it powerful is not just participation, but the process of collective ownership—where decisions, responsibilities, and leadership are distributed across the ecosystem.

The two-month preparation itself becomes a space of practice. Through weekly dialogues, stakeholders jointly design every aspect—from cultural programs to logistics—building coordination, trust, and accountability. Committees formed across roles and identities ensure that leadership is shared, and action is collaborative rather than centralized.

With 7,000–8,000 participants across Purulia, Birbhum, and South 24 Parganas, Samya Mela creates a shared public space for dialogue and norm change. Activities like the "Game of Changing Norms" enable people to engage with ideas of gender, identity, and coexistence in participatory ways, reinforcing learning through experience.

What emerges is a clear systems shift:

- Communities move from participation to co-creation
- Leadership becomes distributed across actors
- Dialogue translates into collective action and ownership

The strong demand to continue Samya Mela reflects that it is no longer externally driven—it is held and sustained by the community itself. At its core, Samya Mela demonstrates that when power, decisions, and responsibility are shared, communities do not just participate—they lead and sustain change together.

Strengthening the Larger Ecosystem Through Networks

This community of practice extends beyond local geographies through active engagement in networks such as AMAN Network, Bhabna Network, MenEngage Alliance, and Maitree Network.

Through these platforms, learning, strategies, and experiences are continuously exchanged—strengthening efforts on gender justice, child rights, prevention of early marriage, and addressing violence. For instance, collaboration between the AMAN Network and

District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) enabled gender trainings for lawyers across Bankura, Jalpaiguri, and Birbhum—where our role in design and facilitation contributed to bridging grassroots insights with institutional systems.

Together, these engagements reflect a broader approach: building interconnected communities of practice—where local action and larger movements inform and strengthen each other for sustained social change

Towards a Sustained Community of Practice

Across these efforts, a clear shift is visible:

- From **isolated trainings → interconnected learning spaces**
- From **individual awareness → collective accountability**
- From **service delivery → ecosystem facilitation**
- From **stakeholders → co-creators and partners**

The ecosystem now includes women's collectives, youth, teachers, local governance structures, frontline workers, and community leaders—engaged in continuous cycles of learning, reflection, and action.
What is emerging is not just increased awareness, but a **living community of practice**—one that:

- Shares knowledge and experiences
- Responds collectively to crises
- Builds local leadership
- Sustains change beyond programme boundaries

This approach recognizes that **lasting social transformation is not driven by single interventions, but by strengthening the relationships, capacities, and accountability across the entire ecosystem**.

Weaving a Narrative of Youth Leadership

Ichhedana: A Story of Young Leadership

On July 8, 2025, at Rotary Sadan, *Community Leadership and Empowerment* brought together the journeys of young changemakers from South 24 Parganas, Birbhum, and Purulia.

A youth panel moderated by Tulika Das highlighted how young people are addressing complex social issues with resilience and innovation. The moment culminated in the release of *Ichhedana* by Nita Bajoriya—a collection of 20 stories of fellows working on education, gender, health, environment, and livelihoods.
Alongside the book, a series of posters on boys' emotional well-being and leadership expands these stories into accessible, community-facing narratives.

Together, they reflect a growing ecosystem where young people are not just participants, but storytellers and leaders shaping chang

Capacity Development

- Team members attended 21 exposure meets and events organized by NGOs, govt bodies where they contributed and expanded their perspectives.
- 14 team members went through 42 counseling and personal growth sessions to deal with personal and work-related stressors and triggers.
- We all carry countless stories within us, stories that connect us, shape us, and inspire us. In both our personal and professional lives, we are constantly creating and discovering new stories. This space helped us reflect on how storytelling allows us to share our experiences, how they have moved us, transformed us, and continue to guide us forward while strengthening our relationships.
- After a long time, we truly reconnected with ourselves in the Annual Retreat understanding our emotions, desires, and inner senses more deeply. Over these two days, we stepped away from daily stress, opened up about mental health, and explored ways to care for ourselves and handle life's challenges.
- The team of Equidiversity Foundation came together for an intensive Organisation Development (OD) and Team Building Workshop. The training gave us an opportunity to reflect on our roles, strengthen teamwork, and improve how we work together to create meaningful impact in the communities we serve. Through participatory exercises, group discussions, simulations, and reflections, we explored several important aspects of our work, teams, leadership and growth.

Critical Learning: The Crisis of Legitimacy among Boys and Young Men

Over the past two years, EDF has surfaced a critical insight:
Gender-equitable values are increasingly understood by young people but are not always experienced as viable.
For many boys above the age of 17, the struggle is not ideological resistance to gender justice, but a **crisis of legitimacy**:

- Masculinity remains tightly tied to income and contribution in economically strained families.
- Gender-equitable identities, when disconnected from dignity, aspiration or livelihood, risk being seen as delays rather than assets.
- Conflicting masculinities—equitable frameworks presented by organizations like ours, aspirational discipline models and dominant political masculinities coexist without sufficient social scaffolding.
- Digital ecosystems often provide validation but frame male vulnerability as backlash against women's rights rather than as a consequence of patriarchal systems.

Strategic Implications

This learning fundamentally shapes our design to work with men and boys. This learning suggests a need to shift the centre of gravity in gender justice work from changing attitudes to strengthening the conditions under which equitable choices can be lived and sustained. Like-

- Linking gender justice with livelihood and aspiration so that equitable masculinities are associated with dignity, contribution and future possibility.
- Rebuilding collective and peer-based spaces that counter isolation and enable young people to experience belonging beyond individual resilience.
- Engaging digital realities intentionally, recognizing algorithms as a formative influence on identity and values rather than a peripheral risk.
- Deepening ecosystem work with families and institutions, expanding what is seen as respectable, safe and viable for both boys and girls.
- Sustaining reflective and adaptive practice, acknowledging that norm change unfolds unevenly and requires patience, care, and long-term accompaniment.

These insights extend beyond programme refinement and call for reflection on the nature of support required to sustain gender justice efforts today. Meaningful change in this context demands longer time horizons, comfort with complexity and ambiguity, and investments that bridge the social, economic and psychological dimensions of transformation. It also calls for deeper dialogue between funding partners and implementing organisations to collectively interpret emerging realities and recalibrate strategies where necessary.

EDF sees the next phase of its work as a continued deepening of inquiry, partnerships and shared accountability in navigating this complexity. We remain committed to reflective practice, collaborative risk-taking and co-creating pathways where gender equity is not only envisioned, but becomes socially legitimate and practically viable.