EQUIDIVERSITY FOUNDATION
Promoting Equity in Diversity

2024

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



EQUIDIVERSITY FOUNDATION

9/1/2024

Executive Summary

This year, we've witnessed a quiet but powerful shift—a movement toward *partnership as daily practice*, not just in how we work with communities, but within our teams. It has meant leaning into reflection, shared leadership, and deeper listening.

Our engagement with the Partnership Brokering Association has been transformative. It prompted us to question top-down methods—whether pushing fixed agendas or over-relying on individual relationships—and instead embrace co-creation with local institutions like the Gram Panchayat, youth groups, and women's committees. Core principles such as building trust, transparent communication, sharing risk, and context-sensitive collaboration are no longer abstract ideals but starting points for real engagement.

A standout example of this shift comes from Arnab Mukherjee, EDF team member in Harnandanpur village, Birbhum. EDF had long struggled to engage a youth group of 17–18-year-olds who had grown increasingly disinterested and resistant. Despite regular visits, sessions failed to take off. After receiving training on partnership-building, Arnab decided to listen differently. Instead of insisting on structure, he invited honesty. The youth shared that they found the sessions boring—and Arnab acknowledged that truth, choosing instead to start with something they cared about: games. What followed was a breakthrough. The group opened up about wanting to learn about online games, reproductive health, and emotional well-being. Sessions were redesigned around these themes. Trust was built, and participation steadily returned. What made the difference? Mutual respect, open communication, and the willingness to *shift power—to listen before leading.*

This evolving practice of partnership has not been without its tensions. We've had to navigate internal and external conflicts, confront discomfort, and unlearn ingrained habits. But these very frictions have taught us to hold space for complexity, rather than rush to resolve it.

One remarkable manifestation of this shift was the *Samya Mela / Equity Fair*, co-led by community members and the local administration. It showed us what's possible when partnerships are rooted in shared risk, collective vision, and community leadership.

Another compelling story comes from *Maheswar Naiya*, a political representative and leader from South 24 Parganas. His experience illustrates how partnership principles transformed his leadership style. Previously inclined to impose decisions, he now convenes diverse stakeholders—from the police and Panchayat to local clubs and NGOs—to address complex issues like child marriage/early elopement and trafficking. His focus has shifted to listening, balancing perspectives, and enabling shared ownership of outcomes. As he puts it, "Tackling these issues needs more than authority—it needs partnership."

We're still learning to balance experience with vulnerability, action with reflection. But the seeds of long-term transformation are being sown. To grow them, we know we'll need more intentional practice, handholding, and spaces for reflection—like the storytelling book we're now compiling to document and share these evolving ways of working.

This year, our systems change mindset deepened our work with institutions—schools, families, local governance, and other key stakeholders. A major learning has been that while we can inspire youth to question stereotypes, the real

challenge lies in navigating unsupportive systems. Without visible role models or enabling environments, it's easier for them to retreat into familiar norms. That's why two approaches stood out by gaining meaningful traction:

1. The Ichhedana Fellowship ("Giving Wings to My Dreams"): The Fellowship was designed not only to embed youth leadership into scalable models but also to give young people a chance to truly *experience* what they are capable of. It offered space for them to recognize their own potential to influence change and the assurance that support would be available if they chose to act on their aspirations.

Through a rigorous but inclusive process, youth leaders were selected and oriented, then invited to present their project ideas to an external panel. Of 23 finalists, 21 (10 boys, 11 girls) went on to implement self-designed projects that promoted gender equality and development sustainability. These included:

- Adult literacy centres for women
- A gender-inclusive dance academy
- Menstrual health sessions for boys
- Sports-based confidence-building for girls
- Campaigns against child labour and school dropout
- Livelihood initiatives and self-defence training

The projects collectively reached more than 1650 people directly and sparked systemic responses. For example, Nayna's self-defense classes are continuing beyond the fellowship, with her trainees and their parents now contributing resources and discussing a paid model. Afsana's literacy centre found a permanent home in a school. Gadadhar's dance academy is preparing for independent operation. These examples reflect both community ownership and the power of belief when young people are given real opportunities and recognition.

2. Multi-Stakeholder Action to End Child Marriage

We've also seen strong traction in our efforts to address social issues like early marriage through intersectional, youth-centred approaches. A key event co-hosted with the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights brought together stakeholders across three districts—DSW, DCPOs, DLSA, police, Childline, JJB, NGOs, Gram Panchayats, youth leaders, and Nari Jagran Committees. Together, we explored shifts needed to meaningfully prevent child marriage, including:

- Framing marriage as a choice, not a necessity
- Combining legal enforcement with norm change
- Engaging male decision-makers
- Positioning girls as citizens and rights-holders
- Promoting boys' mental health and gender equity
- Strengthening local child protection systems like Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLCPCs)/Gram Panchayat Level Child Protection Committees (GLCPCs)
- Advocating for policy shifts—e.g., reworking schemes like Rupasree into scholarships for skill-building rather than marriage incentives

This collaborative, systems-oriented strategy is now influencing how we tackle other issues like domestic violence and gender-based discrimination. The traction we're seeing—through both visible outcomes and quieter shifts in mindset—suggests the groundwork for long-term transformation is being laid.

Reimagining power through a gender equality lens brings immense pressure, especially for girls who have been conditioned to believe that well-being is guaranteed within the institution of marriage. For many, particularly in contexts of economic precarity and social control—marriage appears to be a safer, more socially accepted path, offering protection, stability, and legitimacy, even at the cost of autonomy. The alternative- challenging deeply entrenched patriarchal norms to assert one's choices, pursue education, or delay marriage; often feels riskier and more isolating. The emotional and social toll of resisting expectations, facing community judgment, or confronting opposition at home can seem far greater than the cost of conforming. Boys in these communities also marry early, often soon after they begin earning and many become fathers within a year.

This makes the journey toward empowerment not just about creating opportunities, but about reshaping the collective narrative around safety, belonging, and worth—so that choosing freedom does not feel like choosing isolation.

There have been moments when we've felt deeply disheartened, especially when some of our most promising youth leaders succumbed to social pressures, compromised on their dreams, or failed to imagine dreams of their own. These experiences have been sobering, prompting us to confront our own expectations of the community, their capacity for risk, and perhaps a misplaced sense of power in believing that we could "control lives." We're still grappling with these realizations—learning to navigate the tension between aspiration and agency, holding patience and trust in process & shifting from leading change to walking alongside those we seek to support.
This year, our work centered on nurturing youth leadership through the Ichhedana Fellowship, where 23 grassroots young leaders identified pressing issues and designed intervention strategies to address them. By strengthening their skills, we reaffirmed our belief that when young people gain confidence and capacity, they can unite their communities, amplify their voices, and engage meaningfully with local administration to drive change. Their journeys were captured in a Bengali publication, *Ichhedana: Ekjhnak Tarun Tarunir Ekraash Akanshar Udaan*.

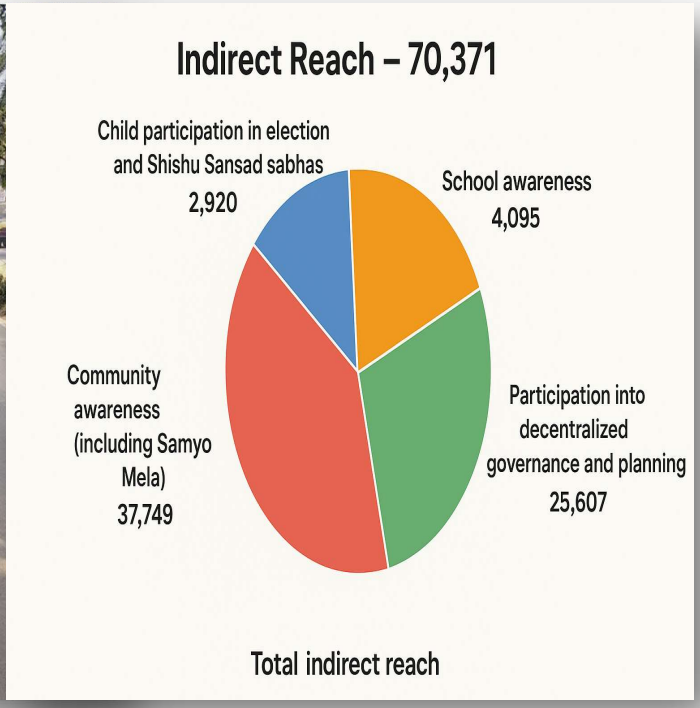
Adopting a systems approach, we deepened collaborations with Gram Panchayats and key government departments including Education, Forest, Police, and Law. These linkages not only broadened the knowledge and awareness of youth but also gave them direct access to officials—transforming ideas into action and strengthening their social capital. Workshops and sessions created safe spaces for youth to reflect on gender equality, sparking critical conversations that challenged entrenched stereotypes and inspired them to imagine a more inclusive society. Small yet significant practices around mental well-being also began to take root within our programs.

Together, these efforts are moving beyond awareness-building—laying the foundation for a movement of confident, resilient, and empowered young leaders.

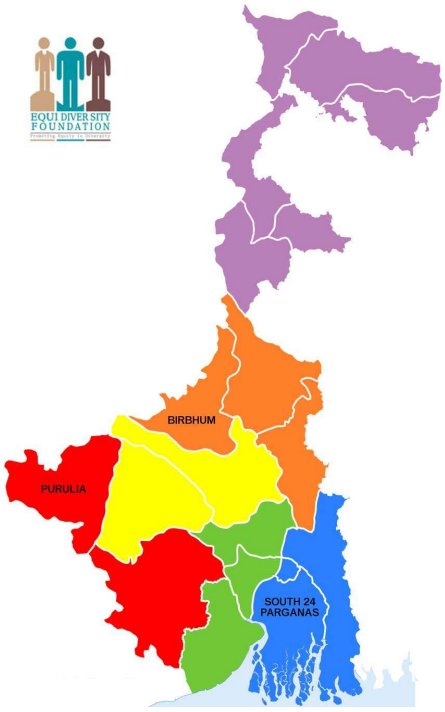
We worked directly and intensely with 3987 people in our communities in this reporting period

Stakeholders	Birbhum	S.24 P	Purulia	Kolkata	Total	% of Total Members	Birbhum Groups	S.24 P Groups	Purulia Groups	Kolkata Groups	Total Groups
Adolescent Boys	196	211	110	360	877	22.4%	17	16	15	15	63
Adolescent Girls	236	212	192	60	700	17.9%	19	15	18	4	56
Child Parliament Boys	176	210	23	0	409	10.5%	20	18	2	0	40
Child Parliament Girls	190	248	27	0	465	11.9%	0	0	0	0	0
Parents	596	287	111	0	994	25.4%	0	0	0	0	0
Teachers	41	38	7	0	86	2.2%	0	0	0	0	0
VLCPC Members	152	73	56	0	281	7.2%	0	0	0	0	0
Panchayat Members & Opinion Leaders	108	46	21	0	175	4.5%	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	1695	1325	547	420	**3987**	100%	56	49	35	19	**159**





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;

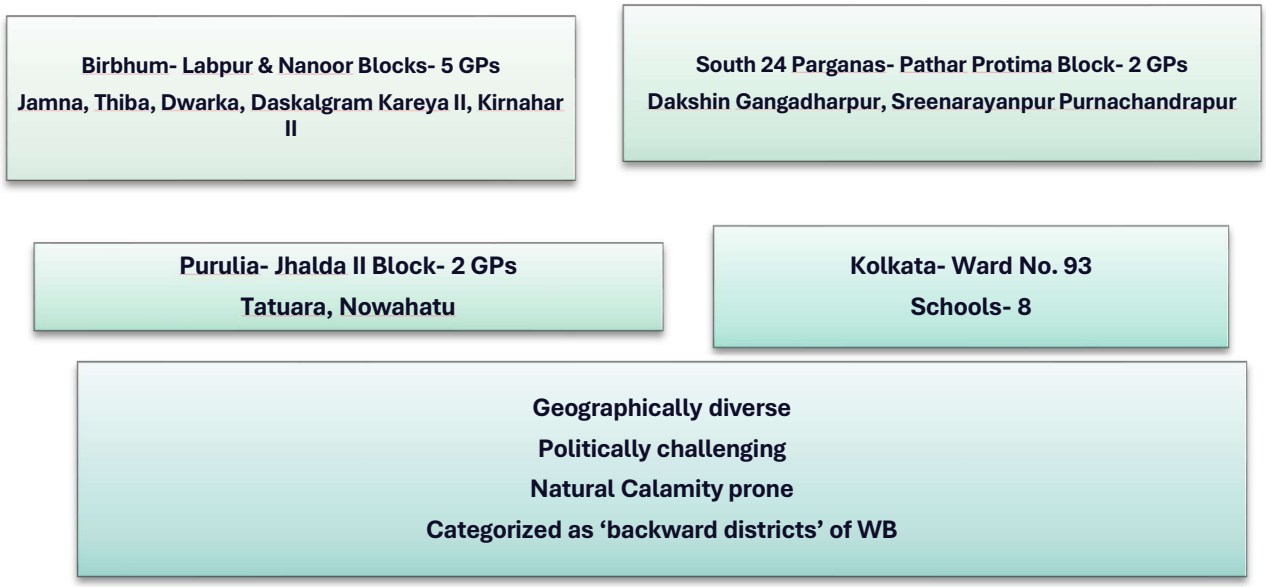
(e) bring parents, teachers into the dialogue and encourage them to become part of the gender equality narrative; and

(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:



- 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



Even as young men continued to engage with our groups, many carried the weight of struggles they could barely articulate. The turbulence of adolescence—questions of career choices, the sting of heartbreak, and the suffocating pull of rigid gender roles—often left them feeling isolated and unheard. Coming from economically marginalized families, boys who dared to dream beyond "masculine" vocations found themselves trapped between their aspirations and the pressure to conform.

Repeatedly, they shared their quiet frustration: parents, though well-meaning, lacked the knowledge or resources to guide them through critical decisions after Class XII. The urgency to start earning quickly, coupled with the absence of clear pathways to alternative livelihoods, left them anxious, burdened, and powerless to negotiate their choices. For many, this silence- being unable to find the words for their fears and hopes, deepened their mental distress.

From April to March, we worked with 63 boys' groups, reaching 877 boys aged 13–21 years. Over the year, we facilitated 867 structured sessions—covering empathy, communication, gender, reproductive health, patriarchy, child rights, Panchayat planning, and social awareness. These included 526 sessions with boys.

To foster dialogue across genders, 25 joint sessions were held where boys and girls came together to reflect on gender equality, masculinity, power-sharing, child protection, and youth leadership. These inclusive spaces began to break taboos around sexuality and mental health, while nurturing a spirit of solidarity.

In addition, several day-long and residential workshops offered deeper engagement on these themes. Over time, we observed young people gradually opening up about their life struggles, emotional pain, and family pressures—experiences they had often carried silently. Recognizing the need for safe outlets, we extended counselling support to 44 youth

(including 26 boys) through 109 sessions, helping them navigate stress, identity struggles, and the overwhelming expectations of earning placed upon them.

While working in a school, we came across Arpan, a 14-year-old Class VIII student. Initially quiet, he soon began disturbing classmates during the sessions, and his behaviour did not improve despite repeated requests. His mother, Shikha, later informed us that he was aggressive at home, used abusive language, threw things in anger, sometimes hither and showed little interest in studies.
Through counselling, we learned that Shikha, a divorcee, was currently living in an abusive relationship where both she and Arpan were mistreated. Shikha herself often scolded or hit Arpan out of frustration, deepening the conflict. We began counselling both mother and son, focusing on communication and coping strategies. Gradually, Arpan started sharing his feelings with his mother and showed improvement in sessions.
Shikha decided to take a step and reported the abusive relationship to the police station, and expressed her wish to become self-reliant. Arpan is supporting her decision.

Some highlights:

Relevance of sessions/activities

In Rangkol, Kolkata, an interesting milestone was achieved with the first-ever Gender Cricket Match, where 14 boys and 14 girls played together as one team. For many girls, it was their first opportunity to step onto the field. Boys not only welcomed them but also trained, supported, and strategized alongside them—directly challenging the local stereotype that "girls can't play." The match became a living example of teamwork, equality, and social change.

The impact was most visible in the personal journeys of young participants. Kushan (13), inspired by the cricket match, said: "Society says girls are weak, but I don't believe that. I want girls to have more opportunities." His words capture the powerful shift of boys questioning patriarchy and learning to stand as allies.

Subrata Bhandari (20) has been part of EquiDiversity Foundation's youth group since January 2023. Through gender and leadership training, he became aware of rights and equality, challenging many of his earlier misconceptions. Once dismissive of women and household work, he has started sharing family responsibilities of housework. He has given up passing sexual comments at girls and encourages peers to do the same.

Exposure visits deepened his awareness of environment and society, and EDF gave him confidence and a space to speak freely. Subrata now aspires to fight child marriage, oppose violence against women, end child labour, and promote equal rights in his community.

Leadership: Youth Leadership in Action

This year, adolescents stepped forward not just as participants but as leaders and change agents—demonstrating responsibility, empathy, and courage in diverse ways. Adolescents moved from being guided to leading with agency and decision-making power.

Environmental Action:

- 17 youth organized Bon Mahotsav campaigns across seven Panchayats, planting 500 saplings, raising environmental awareness, and working alongside the Forest Department.
- On the occasion of Independence Day, a parthenium eradication program was undertaken in two Gram Panchayats: Kirnahar-II Gram Panchayat and Das Kalgram Koreya-II Gram Panchayat. The program covered two football fields and a 3 km stretch along the roadsides from Koreya to the Baliyara Gram Panchayat office. A total of 24 adolescent boys, 11 adolescent girls, 12 Child Parliament ministers, and 12 NJC sisters jointly carried out the task of removing the shrubs.

Summer Camp Leadership: 31 adolescents independently ran a two-day residential camp for 126 younger children, ensuring their safety, learning, and care—proving their ability to take charge with maturity. EDF provided logistical support.

Intervention to address GBV: 17 Young people intervened to stop and report 31 child marriages, and support peers in distress—transforming empathy into action.

Raksha Bandhan of Solidarity: 1,170 handmade rakhis carried a message of unity and solidarity beyond caste, religion, and gender, reaching 669 community members and eight schools.

Community Dialogues: Through 4 film screenings on child labour and abuse, 7 youth created spaces for honest conversations with parents, resulting in commitments toward collective child protection.



Safe Holi Campaign: This year too, the holi campaign started last year was carried forward by the youth to highlight the importance of safe holi particularly in South 24 Parganas. 6 awareness events were conducted by 11 youth, reaching mor than 2000 people.

Ichhedana Fellowship: Role Modeling Leadership

The Ichhedana Fellowship- Giving Wings to Dreams was launched to give young people the space to recognize their potential and design their own pathways for change. Through a competitive but inclusive process, 21 youth (10 boys, 11 girls) implemented projects on education, gender equality, health, environment, and livelihoods—directly reaching over 1,650 people.

Fellows were selected through nominations and group discussions, followed by orientations that helped them reflect on leadership and social issues. They then presented their project ideas to an external panel, ensuring accountability and rigor. Once selected, each fellow designed and implemented their project with consistent mentoring support—learning to

balance creativity, responsibility, and resilience. This process allowed youth to lead from their lived realities, while mentors acted as guides rather than directors.
Projects ranged from adult literacy centres and gender-inclusive dance academies to menstrual health sessions for boys, sports initiatives for girls, and campaigns against child marriage and school dropout. Many initiatives sparked community ownership—for example, Afsana's literacy centre found a permanent home in a school, Nayna's self-defence classes explores continuity under a paid model, and Gadadhar's dance academy is preparing for independence.

Beyond social impact, the fellowship built youth resilience, leadership, and confidence, reinforcing a critical insight: young women dream of freedom from dependency and imposed expectations, while young men wrestle with identity and the challenge of sharing power. Leadership, we learned, grows stronger when rooted in responsibility, trust, and lived experience.

Stories of Change

- Afsana (18): Started a literacy project for 30 women—her students now read, write.
- Sabuj (17): Brought dropout children back to school by convincing families and donating books.
- Monika (15): Formed a girls' football team, defying social pressure to pursue her dream.
- Lipi (14): Resisted early marriage, now leads her football team with family support.

From Shadows to Strength

Even though women work tirelessly for their families, their financial contributions often go unnoticed, and their opinions are undervalued. This inspired my dream—that all women in my village become self-reliant.
That dream began to take flight with the Ichhedana Fellowship, supported by the Equidiversity Foundation. I am Akshay Ghosh, 17, a Class XI student from Kandarkula village, Thiba Gram Panchayat, Birbhum.
Through the Icchedana fellowship, I aimed to involve 40–50 women in income-generating activities. The journey was not easy. At first, I could gather only a few women, and I even failed twice while teaching them organic fertilizer making. But with my mentors' guidance, I eventually succeeded, and soon 40 women joined in.
We started with organic fertilizers, which reduced household expenses. The use of organic manure enhances the nutritional value of crops, fetching higher market prices. Using it at home reduces daily vegetable market expenses, saving approximately 500 INR per month for 17 families. Additionally, by selling surplus organic manure, 17 women earn income by selling 25 kg of manure each month, with a market value of (25 kg x 10.00 = 250.00 INR). They have been earning this amount for two months.
Then I introduced mushroom cultivation, enabling women to earn by producing and selling mushrooms. Today, 15 women and 2 men in my village are earning this way. I also trained 20 women in Debgram and 30 women in Kandarkula. Later, I taught them to make organic pesticides, which improved family health and contributed to environmental protection.
This initiative not only brought income but also boosted women's confidence and dignity. I learned leadership, communication, and resilience, while also gaining recognition—today even government officials know and respect me.
My mission is clear: to show women that they too can do everything. Economic independence strengthens their voice in the family and society.
When I see the spark of self-reliance in their eyes, I know we have truly moved from shadows to strength

- Pritam (17): Launched a plantation drive, inspiring 150 villagers to plant trees.

For team EDF, Ichhedana reaffirmed that youth leadership is not built through instruction but through trust, space, and shared ownership. We also learned the importance of patience—knowing when to guide and when to step back—so that young people could discover their own paths with confidence.

The first year of Ichhedana has shown that when youth are trusted with real opportunities, they not only lead social change but also transform themselves into role models for their communities.

Breaking Myths, Building Strength

My name is Noyna Banik from Dakshin Gangadharpur, Patharpratima Block. I just completed my Higher Secondary exams and, through the Ichhedana Fellowship, I started a project to empower girls with self-defense and fitness training.

In six months, I have trained 50 girls (ages 9–18) in gymnastics and self-defense—helping them build strength, courage, and confidence. It wasn't easy. Neighbours mocked me, saying girls who learn self-defense become "bad." But my family stood by me, and today the same people proudly send their daughters to my classes.

The fellowship has changed me too. I am more confident, respected, and even able to support my education through the stipend. Parents now ask me to continue teaching beyond the fellowship, and my students have already performed publicly at Samya Mela.

I believe girls must be independent and self-reliant, not defined only as someone's daughter, wife, or daughter-in-law. To all girls my age, I say: *do not rush into early marriage—build your own identity, your own strength.*

We plan to develop a video of the work of Icchedana Fellows and a book with their journey.



সঙ্গীতার ইচ্ছেডানা

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নাম তাঁর সঙ্গীতা টুডু, বয়স আঠারো। পুরুলিয়া জেলার ঝালদা ২ নম্বর ব্লকের ছোট্ট গ্রাম ডামরুঘুটুতে বাস। বিএ প্রথম বর্ষের ছাত্রী এখন। স্বেচ্ছাসেবী সংস্থা 'ইকুইডাইভার্সিটি ফাউন্ডেশন'-এর 'ইচ্ছেডানা' ফেলোশিপের একজন ফেলো তিনি। সঙ্গীতার দাবি, এই ফেলোশিপের মাধ্যমে নিজের ইচ্ছে প্রকাশ করা এবং এলাকার মানুষকে সচেতন করা সম্ভব হয়েছে। অষ্টাদশীর মনে হয়েছে, পুরুলিয়ার টাটুয়ারা ও ডামরুঘুটু সাধারণ দুটো গ্রাম, যেখানে মেয়েদের স্বপ্ন দেখাটা যেন অপরাধ। খুব অল্প বয়সেই বিয়ে দিয়ে দেওয়া হয় গ্রামের মেয়েদের। গ্রামে যেন আর কোনও মেয়ের বাল্যবিবাহ না হয় সেই চেষ্টাতেই ব্রতী সঙ্গীতা।

কীভাবে কাজ করেন তিনি? সঙ্গীতার কথায়, "টাটুয়ারা ও ডামরুঘুটু গ্রামে বাল্যবিবাহ রোধের জন্য মেয়েদের দল গঠন করি। মেয়েদের নিয়ে ফুটবল টিম তৈরি করি। কারণ, আমি বিশ্বাস করি খেলাধুলো আত্মবিশ্বাস বাড়ায়, স্বপ্ন দেখতে



ফেরের আলো

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বীরভূমের থিবা গ্রাম পঞ্চায়েতের দত্ত বগাতোড় গ্রামে থাকেন আফসানা খাতুন। বয়স সতেরো। ক্লাস টুয়েলভে পড়েন। তিনিও ইকুইডাইভার্সিটি ফাউন্ডেশনের ইচ্ছেডানা ফেলোশিপের একজন সদস্য। তাঁর স্বপ্ন, গ্রামের বয়স্ক মহিলারাও শিক্ষার আলোয় আলোকিত হন। আফসানা জানিয়েছেন, ইচ্ছেডানা ফেলোশিপ তাঁর কাছে শুধু একটা প্রোজেক্ট নয়, এটা তাঁর স্বপ্নপূরণের জায়গা।

'বয়স্ক সাক্ষরতা' নিয়ে আফসানার প্রোজেক্ট-এর উদ্দেশ্য পরিণত নাগরিকদের পড়াশোনা শেখানো, জে তাঁদের উন্নীত করা। গ্রামের ২০-৫৫ বছর বয়সি ৩০ জন মহিলাকে লেখাপড়া শেখান তিনি। তাঁর য়, 'শিক্ষার কোনও বয়স নেই। কীভাবে নিজের নাম লিখতে হয়, চিঠি পড়তে হয়, ফর্ম ভরতে হয়— র শেখাই। গ্রামের মানুষের একটা ভ্রান্ত ধারণা রয়েছে যে বয়স্ক মানে তাঁর আর পড়াশোনা শিখে কিছু না। তাঁদের বোঝাতে চাই, যে কোনও বয়সেই শেখা সম্ভব।'

আফসানাকে প্রথম দিকে গ্রামের অনেকে বলেছিলেন, 'এই বয়সে আর লেখাপড়া করে কী হবে?' ট কেউ আবার বলতেন, 'এইটুকু মেয়ে আমাদের আবার কী শেখাবে?' স্কুলের শিক্ষক প্রথমে তাঁকে ন নেওয়ার অনুমতি দিলেও পরে বারণ করেন। এমন নানা প্রতিকূলতা সত্ত্বেও দমে যাননি তিনি। তেন, কাজটা কতটা জরুরি। তাকে সাহায্য করেছে গ্রামের পঞ্চায়েত, ইকুইডাইভার্সিটি ফাউন্ডেশন, ইতিক নেতা এবং শিক্ষকরা।

কাজ যত এগিয়েছে, সাফল্যও এসেছে। আফসানার কথায়, 'আজ আমি গর্ব করে বলতে পারি, মার এলাকার মানুষ নিজেদের নাম লিখতে পারেন, চিঠি পড়তে পারেন, ফর্ম পূরণ করতে পারেন। া এখন নিজেদের অধিকার সম্পর্কেও সচেতন। আমার কাজের জন্য পঞ্চায়েতের স্মারক সম্মাননা য়েছি, স্পিকার হিসেবে কথা বলার সুযোগ পেয়েছি। দক্ষতা, সাহস আর আত্মবিশ্বাস বেড়েছে। সবচেয়ে কথা, এলাকায় নিজের পরিচয়ে পরিচিত হয়েছি। ইচ্ছেডানা ফেলোশিপ আমার পড়াশোনায় কাজে গেছে।'



অদম্য নয়না

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সুন্দরবনের পাথরপ্রতিমা ব্লকের দক্ষিণ গঙ্গাধরপুর অঞ্চলের কন্যা নয়না বণিক এবার উচ্চমাধ্যমিক দিয়েছেন। ইকুইডাইভার্সিটি ফাউন্ডেশন-এর ইচ্ছেডানা ফেলোশিপে কাজ করছেন তিনিও। তাঁর প্রকল্পের উদ্দেশ্য মেয়েদের আত্মরক্ষার কৌশল শেখানো। নয়না বলছেন, 'ইচ্ছেডানা ফেলোশিপ নিজেকে চেনার একটা জায়গা, আত্মবিশ্বাস জাগানোর উপায়। এই ফেলোশিপের মাধ্যমে ১০-১২ জন মেয়েকে স্বনির্ভর হওয়ার স্বপ্ন দেখাতে পেরেছি, তাদের আত্মরক্ষার কৌশল শিখিয়েছি।'

কীভাবে কাজ করেন তিনি? 'যখন আত্মরক্ষার কৌশল শিখতে যেতাম, পাড়া-প্রতিবেশী, আত্মীয়স্বজন নানা কথা বলত। ট্রেনিং সেন্টারে ছেলেদের সঙ্গে শিখতে হতো বলে লোকজন বলত, এই মেয়ে আর বাড়িতে টিকবে না!'

বাধার উল্টো পিঠে থাকে ভালোবাসাও। বাড়ির সবাই তাঁকে বাইরে গিয়ে ট্রেনিং নিতে উৎসাহ দিয়েছেন। তাঁর মন্তব্য, 'গত ছ'মাসে ৯-১৮ বছর বয়সি প্রায় ৫০ জন মেয়েকে জিমন্যাস্টিক শিখিয়েছি। রাস্তায় মেয়েদের হেনস্তার মোকাবিলা করতে আত্মরক্ষার কৌশল শিখতেই হবে।'

ফেলোশিপে কাজ করতে করতে আত্মবিশ্বাস, পরিচিতি, কাজের দক্ষতা বেড়েছে নয়নার। তিনি বলেন, 'এখন অনেকে আমাকে চেনে, আমি স্বনির্ভর, সেটা জানে। যারা আগে বাধা দিত, তারাই এখন সমর্থন করে। বাবার রোজগার নেই, তাই ফেলোশিপের স্টাইপেন্ড দিয়েই পড়াশোনা চালাই।'

প্রথম দিকে বাড়ি বাড়ি গিয়ে কথা বলতে অসুবিধা হতো। কেউ রাজি হতো না, ছাত্রী পাওয়াই কঠিন ছিল। পরে নয়না তাঁর মেন্টরকে সঙ্গে নিয়ে সার্ভে করেছেন এবং বুঝিয়েছেন আত্মরক্ষার কৌশল শিখে মেয়েদের কী লাভ হবে। এরপর অভিভাবকেরা তাঁদের মেয়েকে ছেড়েছেন। ক্লাস দেখে পরে বলেছেন, 'ওদের আরও শেখান।'

নয়না মনে করেন, মেয়েদের স্বনির্ভর হওয়া উচিত যাতে কারও কাছে হাত পাততে না হয়। মেয়েকে কলেজে ভর্তি করা বা পড়াশোনার খরচ চালানো নয়নার বাবার পক্ষে সম্ভব নয়। তাই তিনি ঠিক করেছেন, রেজাল্টের পর রোজগারের চেষ্টা করবেন এবং পড়াশোনাও করবেন। এখন শাড়িতে জরি লাগানোর কাজ শুরু করেছেন। তাঁর বয়সি সব মেয়েকে নয়না বলতে চান, 'অল্প বয়সে বিয়ে না করে স্বনির্ভর হও, নিজের পরিচয় তৈরি করো। বিয়ে যে কোনও সময় করা যাবে। অন্যের পরিচয়ে না বেঁচে নিজের পরিচয়ে বাঁচো। কারও মেয়ে, কারও বউ, কারও বৌমা না হয়ে কাজ করে নিজের পরিচয় তৈরি করো।'

অলঙ্করণ: সুমনকুমার সিংহ

Enabling young girls & women to become confident leaders

We organized 338 structured sessions with 56 girls' groups and 696 members. 21 daylong sessions on gender and child rights and laws.



Seventeen-year-old Kusum (name changed), once shy and reserved, found her voice through the youth group. She began questioning taboos around menstruation and openly defended girls' rights to dress freely. Her courage was tested when a boy attempted to blackmail her with a morphed obscene photo. At first, Kusum was deeply shaken and hesitant to share the matter with her family, fearing they might stop her education. Recognizing her distress, EDF staff provided counselling and mental support, helping her understand that she was not at fault and that no crime had been committed on her part. With this reassurance and eventually with her parents' backing, Kusum gathered the strength to approach the cybercrime cell and report the incident. Her actions not only protected her dignity but also inspired those around her. She now continues her studies with renewed determination, assists her father with legal matters when needed, and stands as a symbol of resilience and maturity—making her family proud.

Wenlido Workshops: Adolescent girls participated in two-days Wenlido self-defense workshops across three districts. The training not only helped them connect with their inner strength but also created a safe space where they could share moments of vulnerability, speak about experiences of abuse, and seek support.

At Bhajna Benepara High School, when we first approached the head teacher to conduct a joint awareness camp with Class 9 and 10 boys and girls, he was reluctant. After discussing his concerns, he agreed. The camp was then organized on child rights and child abuse, with a special focus on child sexual abuse, its impacts, and the POCSO Act. About 70 students (boys and girls) participated. During the session, youth leaders led the discussions.

After the camp, four girls came forward to share experiences of sexual abuse that they had never disclosed, not even to their families. The safe space of the camp gave them the courage to speak, and they expressed a wish to continue engaging with us regularly. Encouraged by the response, the head teacher said: *"Such awareness camps should be held once every month. Students will gain knowledge on many important issues."* Following this, five girls joined Wenlido training, taking steps to overcome the trauma of violence they had faced in their own lives.

Highlights of Joint Sessions

In South 24 Parganas, a joint meeting was held with boys and girls to discuss the mental and social pressures faced during adolescence. In this space, both boys and girls were able to listen to each other's situations and empathize with one another. The discussions revealed how girls often face restrictions—if parents discover they are in a relationship, they stop them from going out, try to arrange early marriage, or sometimes even resort to violence. Unable to cope with such pressure, some girls run away from home.

Since the conversation happened in a mixed group, the boys gained a clearer understanding of the challenges, risks, and barriers in girls' lives. Rajat, one of the boys, shared: *"Earlier, I used to think girls have many advantages—they get schemes like Kanyashree and Rupashree, and can do whatever they want. But after hearing directly from them in this meeting, I realized how much they suffer. Now, I try to listen to and understand my girl friends' struggles. Earlier, when girls used to play in the local playground, people in the neighborhood would mock them or pass comments. A few of us boys in the group have now taken responsibility to make sure girls too can play freely in the field."*

Working with Parents

One of the most significant developments has been the growing involvement of parents—especially mothers, and increasingly fathers. Parents are now more willing to engage with what their children are learning in the sessions. This shift has been crucial as we begin discussions on reproductive health, sexuality, relationships, and related issues. Parents were encouraged to critically reflect on harmful practices such as child marriage and child labour, which opened up new spaces for dialogue and change.

Partnerships with parents, teachers, and Panchayats anchored sustainable community accountability.

Parent Engagement at a Glance

- 883 parents engaged
    - Youth parents: 590
    - Child Parliament parents: 293

Discussion topics: summer camps, child marriage, child labour, leadership training, behavioural changes among children and youth, safe/unsafe touch, child rights, child abuse and protection.

Our adult engagement in Kolkata has been equally significant.
20 teachers were trained to address child marriage, child labour, and child safety
25 mothers participated in open conversations on menstruation, adolescent health, and girls' education
One mother reflected: *"I never thought I could talk about menstruation openly. Now I have the courage to discuss it with my son."*

Trainings conducted: 4 (for youth parents): Topics covered: gender, child rights, child abuse and protection, POCSO Act. Parents are no longer passive observers. They are slowly emerging as active allies in breaking taboos, supporting adolescent voices, and shaping a culture of equality and protection.

"The youth group gave my son a platform to express himself. Today, he is recognized, leads social programs, and even supports us in household responsibilities."- Rinki Thakur (mother of Prem Thakur)

"I once discouraged my son's passion for dance. Today, his performances bring pride to our family and community. I regret not supporting him earlier and now want more families to break such biases." -Uttam Bittar, father of Gadadhar Bittar

"From being shy, my daughter now leads a drama team, even taking on male roles on stage. I am proud of her transformation and her dream of social change."- Golapi Chattoraj, mother of Sangita Chattoraj.

At fifteen, Neha Naskar experienced a struggle for power inside her own home. What began as small disagreements with her mother soon grew into constant clashes. Decisions about how Neha spent her time, when she helped with chores, or how she managed her day were tightly controlled by her mother. Though rooted in care and protection, this control left Neha feeling silenced, her independence denied. The imbalance of power strained their relationship—love was overshadowed by frustration and distance.

When Jinia from our team intervened, she helped both mother and daughter recognize the underlying issue of control. With Neha, she explored how asserting her voice was not a rejection of her mother's love but a natural part of adolescence. With her mother, she highlighted how rigid control, even when motivated by concern, can weaken trust and fuel resistance. Jinia encouraged a shift—from control to dialogue, from authority to shared decision-making.

Gradually, the dynamic changed. Neha's mother began to release some control, allowing her daughter small but meaningful choices. Neha, in turn, softened her resistance and re-engaged with her mother.

Working with teachers

We have worked with 86 teachers on a regular basis. Meetings and 2 workshops were organized with them.

"Through the Child Parliament, children like Pritam have learned how to take responsibility and work for their peers. The way he intervened to bring back a dropout student shows the power of this initiative. It also teaches us as teachers to listen more to children's voices."- Nirmalendu Samaddar, Teacher, Panchpara Primary School

Strengthening Child Parliaments

"Earlier, we never thought children could take the lead in maintaining cleanliness or raising their voices for school issues. But after becoming ministers in the Child Parliament, students like Ipshita have taken charge and influenced others. This program is truly shaping leaders."- Suniti Mandal, Teacher, Darka JB School

In 2024–25, Child Parliaments were institutionalized in 21 schools, engaging 291 ministers and 773 members. Children conducted formal elections—handling presiding, polling, and logistics—bringing democratic practice into the classroom. Sessions explored gender, empathy in governance, child rights, safe/unsafe touch, health, and nutrition, grounding civic leadership in equity and protection.

Children's Voices for Change

Through these forums, 475 children presented their priorities directly to Panchayats through Bal Sansad Sabhas, demanding play spaces, school repairs, clean toilets, better benches, and improved mid-day meals. For the first time, many children saw that their voices could influence real solutions.

The model's impact spread. Inspired by the Parliaments in Thiba and Kinnahar II, **Bara Sawta Gram Panchayat** held its own session, collected **32 child-focused plans**, and committed to becoming a child-friendly Panchayat.

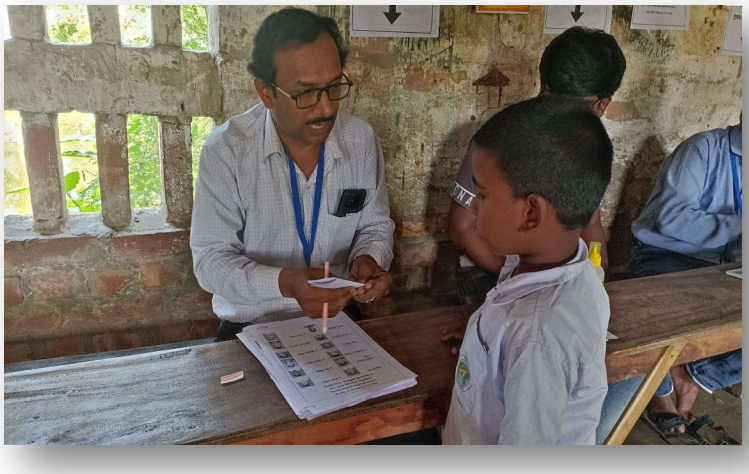
Building Trust and Results

- Children celebrated as most of last year's plans were implemented in Thiba Panchayat. This year, 320 children from 16 schools submitted new plans.
- The Thiba Girls' Football Team (22 members) also received equipment from EDF and the Panchayat, signalling strong community support for girls in sports.

Stories of Action

- *Pritam (Education Minister): Helped a dropout return to school through peer visits and teacher engagement.*
- *Ipshita (Environment Minister): Introduced waste segregation and peer awareness on cleanliness.*
- *Rupanjana (Education Minister): Advocated for clean water at Panchayat level; a filter was sanctioned in the GPDP plan.*
- *Aranya (Food Minister): Ensured fair mid-day meal distribution and mobilized peers.*
- *Titli (Education Minister): Overcame shyness to promote inclusive play and mediate conflicts.*
- *Piu (Prime Minister): Strengthened hygiene practices and gained confidence to pursue her interests.*

From preventing child marriage to improving water access and supporting child survivors of violence, Gram Sabhas and Child Parliaments are proving that inclusive participation builds safer, fairer, and more resilient communities. Our goal is to convert Child Parliaments as incubators of leadership and accountability—where children not only learn democracy but also shape their communiti





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.

Engaging with Village Level Child Protection Committees

We activated and strengthened 21 Village level Child Protection Committees. In August, 4 VLCPC workshops were held across three district.

A noticeable change was observed in Tuhina Khan Jamadar, a woman elected representative from Meherpur village in sreenarayanpur Purnachandrapur Gram Panchayat. Although she had been attending meetings after her election, earlier

she rarely voiced her opinions or took initiative with confidence. However, through continued engagement in VLCPC meetings and follow-up sessions during September and October, a significant shift became visible.
By the third week of October, she actively conducted a household survey in her area and identified 11 vulnerable children. Among them, she noted cases requiring protection support as well as organizational assistance and awareness interventions. Importantly, she has now begun to express her opinions openly in front of others, demonstrating growing confidence and leadership.

A Multi-Stakeholder Meet Jointly organized by: West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights (WBCPCR) & Equidiversity Foundation in Purulia during the reporting period.

Participants included:

- DSWO, DCPO, DLSA, Childline representatives, Block officials, Police & SJPU
- JJB, Gram Panchayat members, Health officials, VLCPC members, Civic Volunteers
- Youth leaders, women's groups, NGOs, school teachers, and parents
- UNICEF district coordinators and ICDS workers

Objectives

- Review the current child protection mechanisms
- Discuss challenges faced by different stakeholders
- Review and modify strategies for prevention of child marriage
- Explore possibilities for a joint government–NGO campaign

Key Highlights

- Three state-level panel discussions on child marriage, chaired by the Hon'ble Chairperson of WBCPCR, called for a shift from a protectionist, law-driven approach to a rights-based, empowerment-centered strategy.
- Current responses rely heavily on police and Childline interventions, which often pressure families through legal threats rather than creating dialogue.
- Prevention efforts remain fragmented and legalistic, with limited engagement of fathers and male decision-makers, despite their central role in marriage-related decisions.
- Adolescents shared feeling *"unheard and caged"*, lacking safe spaces to explore aspirations, sexuality, or mental health.
- Parents, especially mothers, view early marriage as a form of "protection" in the absence of systemic safety nets.
- Schools and local institutions have potential but are yet to function as true spaces of empowerment.

Core Insight from the Panel: Sustainable progress requires empowering adolescents as leaders, engaging men and fathers as allies, and addressing child marriage within broader struggles against poverty, gender inequality, and weak governance. Without this paradigm shift, interventions will remain reactive, teenage pregnancies will persist, and forced marriages will continue.

Recommendations and Policy Shifts

- Move from a protectionist approach to a rights-and-duties framework, enabling adolescents to make informed choices.
- Reframe marriage from an inevitability to a choice, ensuring state schemes support education and livelihoods.
- Engage fathers and male family members as critical decision-makers.
- Mainstream gender, mental health, and child rights into school curricula and GPDP processes.

- Provide long-term mentorship and fellowship opportunities for adolescents to build leadership and delay marriage.
- Strengthen inter-departmental coordination and recognition of NGOs as key frontline partners.

Looking ahead, similar consultations will be held in other districts over the next few years. Insights from these forums, alongside learnings from community initiatives, will be consolidated into a policy recommendation report and formally submitted to WBCPCR and the State Government. This process will ensure that grassroots experiences directly inform state-level strategies for child rights and protection.

Samya Mela (Festival of Equality)

Objective: To unite people across caste, religion, ethnicity, and gender and start a dialogue to challenge entrenched social practices; raise awareness on safety through interactive activities; empower women; and foster critical thinking among adolescents. This year's these was "Safety".

Planning Process: The Mela was co-created by Equidiversity Foundation, Gram Panchayat representatives, the Nari Jagaran Committee, youth groups, political leaders, local organizations, teachers, and community members. Responsibilities and resources were shared collectively. The process included large scale meetings with Gram Panchayats to set purpose and vision; multiple rounds of discussions to finalize plans and consultations with senior members to resolve challenges.

Execution & Participation

- 575 community based volunteers
    - Youth-304
    - Women-154
    - Teachers-45
    - Political leadership-72
- **The community contributed ₹2,05,000 collectively. Food was arranged for nearly 7,000 participants throughout the day**



-Youth leadership managed poster campaigns, wall writing, banner installation, training children for games, fundraising, rallies, stalls, guest support, plays, invitations, and logistics.
-Nari Jagaran Committee led fundraising, awareness drives, food arrangements, and cultural/sports coordination.
-Teachers facilitated games and competitions.
-Political leaders, Panchayat members, and community individuals provided active support in publicity and logistics.

Impact: The Samya Mela became an inclusive celebration of diversity, rooted in collective ownership. Youth worked in dedicated teams to manage communication, execution, campaign, mobilization and taking part in games and cultural programs—ensuring smooth execution. Women and leaders collaborated on food, hospitality, and awareness activities.

Samyo Mela Diary, 28th December, Dakshin Gangadharpur, Pathar Protima, Sunderbans
Anindita Majumdar, Managing Trustee

Traveling through various Samyo Melas across districts, I arrived at the Samyo Mela held on the Bhajna Benepara grounds in Dakshin Gangadharpur on 28th December, at 1:30 pm. This time, my role was that of an observer-- listening, measuring, and experiencing the hard work, dedication, and joy that brought this event to life. The fair was in full swing, with thousands of participants and visitors alike filling the ground. Despite their varied roles, everyone shared one thing in common: bright, beaming smiles. The faint complaints were about the ground being small and unable to hold multiple track and field events simultaneously.

Amidst the vibrant crowd, it was difficult to distinguish the organizers from the participants—their roles seemed to have seamlessly merged. The Mela featured a variety of activities, including game stalls, track and field events, and cultural programs, all running simultaneously and effortlessly. Familiar faces greeted me warmly, teasing, "You're late. We missed you on the stage, rallying the women with your slogans. By the way, welcome to my neighborhood!"

For the past seven years, we have been working in the two Gram Panchayats of Pathar Protima Block—Dakshin Gangadharpur and Sreenarayanpur Purnachandrapur. This marked our third Samyo Mela. Mira Das, a long-standing Panchayat member who has been part of all three, captured the spirit of the event beautifully: "In 2021, Samyo Mela was a unique experience for us—we had never seen anything like it. But look at it now. The theme and ideas have become part of our understanding. Today, we truly own the Mela."

My heart swelled with pride as I watched our youth fellows and group members skilfully manage the event, welcoming guests with warmth and confidence. One highlight this year was the women's tug-of-war, redefined as a neighborhood competition. Teams arrived wearing matching jerseys—same-colored T-shirts over their sarees with salwars underneath, topped off with caps. Seeing the enthusiasm and competitiveness, I wouldn't be surprised if this evolves into a Pathar Protima championship in the near future!

It was equally inspiring to see women of all ages participating enthusiastically in track and field events. Middle-aged men also joined in, competing with youngsters in activities like folding sarees, crushing coriander on a stone plank, and using rolling pins. One 50-year-old man, smiling despite his disqualification, said, "I gave it my best effort, it is pretty hard you know."

Many of the props used for the track and field events, such as stone planks and masala crushers, were generously lent by women from the neighborhood. For them, today was a break from cooking. A total of 2,200 people enjoyed rice, egg curry, and chutney at the fair, with the meal sponsored by the two organizing Gram Panchayats.

Samyo Mela has truly come of age, growing into a beloved event for the community. Conversations about gender equality, once challenging, are now a little easier and more natural.

One elderly gentleman approached me, commending our efforts. "This arrangement is wonderful, but it must have cost a lot. How did you manage?" he asked. With pride, I explained that the community had collectively shouldered the expense. Contributions came from the Nari Jagaran Committee, youth groups, schoolteachers, local shopkeepers, social workers, the Gram Panchayat, and the Equidiversity Foundation through a donation drive.

Samyo Mela is no longer just an event—it's a testament to the community's spirit, collaboration, and shared vision for progress. Pathar Protima Equidiversity Foundation Team members stood tall hidden in the crowd.

Residential Workshop with Political Representatives and Leaders

Establishing equity among stakeholders and balancing power is essential to ensure voices are heard and contributions valued. Using gender and partnership approaches, we facilitated this shift by engaging elected and nominated political leaders in a residential workshop in Kolkata and day-long district workshops. These spaces enabled difficult conversations on power sharing, collective leadership, accountability, and empathy, leading to both debate and alignment. Leaders reflected on their own leadership styles and decision-making, while role plays helped them recognize how patriarchal assumptions and stereotypes often shape their choices and interactions with women and other marginalized groups. With the support of Partnership Brokering Association, we also engaged a mixed cohort of male leaders, women community members, NGO workers to experiment and reflect on their collaborative practices. Three leaders from these residential workshops also became part of the cohort.

Transforming Authority into Allyship: A Political Leader's Commitment to Collective Action

Maheswar Naiya

As a political leader and an active member of a political party, establishing and maintaining communication with various stakeholders is of utmost importance to me. In my region, I work closely with different entities such as the Panchayat, police stations, Block Development Officer (BDO), schools, local clubs, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Members of Parliament (MP), and other influential figures. Understanding their challenges and needs allows me to take the necessary steps to address them effectively. Therefore, when making decisions, I find it crucial to evaluate them through the lens of partnership principles. I have participated in two partnership training programs, where I gained insights into different principles of partnership. The two principles that have had the most profound impact on me are 'openness', which promotes transparent discussions where everyone can participate, and 'shared risk and benefit', which emphasizes moving towards a goal collectively while sharing both the rewards and challenges. We have been working on several government initiatives, particularly focused on preventing child marriage and human trafficking. Various NGOs have been actively engaged in these issues for a long time, but there was a need to align their efforts with the government and administrative bodies. To facilitate this, I organized a meeting that included the Circle Inspector (CI), MLA, Panchayat Samiti members, local clubs, Anganwadi workers, police, BDO, and other key stakeholders. The issue of increasing child marriages and subsequent human trafficking has become a serious concern in our region. Every stakeholder present in the meeting had a crucial role to play in addressing this crisis. My primary role was to moderate the discussion, ensuring that every member could voice their concerns, share their perspectives, and determine how much they could contribute. Although different members had varying opinions, I aimed to establish a shared goal that everyone could work towards Tackling child marriage and human trafficking cannot be done single- handedly by any one entity. A collective approach is necessary, where all stakeholders agree on a unified goal and work together strategically. I also focused on ensuring that coordination was maintained so that every participant could listen to and understand each other's perspectives. One of my biggest takeaways from the partnership training was the importance of active listening and mutual exchange of ideas, ensuring that every perspective—whether beneficial or challenging— is considered. When conflicts or challenges arise, I make it a point to listen to all parties involved before arriving at a well-rounded decision. In the past, I would sometimes impose my decisions without thorough consultation, even using pressure tactics when needed, but I have since shifted towards a more inclusive and consensus-driven approach. This has not only improved my effectiveness but has also made it easier to gain the trust and cooperation of all stakeholders. Recently, a case of elopement came to my attention, where the families of the individuals involved approached me seeking a resolution. The young boy and girl who had **elo**ped were

brought back, and their families were also present for the discussion. I took this opportunity to explain to both parties the negative consequences of early marriage—both from a social and legal standpoint. I also emphasized the legal repercussions that could arise from such actions. During the discussion, I facilitated a dialogue between both families to resolve their disputes amicably. Eventually, I was able to convince them to send the boy and girl back to their respective homes, ensuring that no immediate harm or distress would arise. Additionally, I reassured them that if any further issues occurred, they could reach out to me for assistance. In previous situations, I often found that if I sided too much with one party, it would cause resentment in the other. However, by applying partnership principles, I now ensure a balanced approach by listening to all sides, synthesizing different perspectives, and making informed decisions. This eliminates biases and promotes fair decision-making, strengthening relationships with the community and improving the overall impact of my leadership. By adopting a partnership-oriented approach, I have been able to make more effective, inclusive, and sustainable decisions that benefit the entire community.

Inclusion of gender responsive planning with Gram Panchayat Development Plan

Following workshops with male leaders on gender, accountability, and collective planning, concrete results began to emerge at the community level. In Dakshin Gangadharpur (3 constituencies) and Srinayaranpur (6 constituencies), men supported the process of neighbourhood meetings where women leaders of the Nari Jagaran Committees could present their priorities. As a result, 17 women leaders in Srinayaranpur GP came forward with clear plans addressing local needs—such as street lighting, toilets in banks and markets, awareness sessions on women's and children's rights, registers for child labour and child marriage, civic patrolling, and budgets for women's skill training and enterprises. Male leaders acknowledged these priorities and encouraged their inclusion in local governance processes. To sustain visibility, Nari Jagaran Committee members, with support from their male counterparts and youth groups, carried out 7 wall writings across two Gram Panchayats to campaign for these community-driven plans.

Networking

We are active members of four regional, state, and national networks (AMAN, Bhabna, Men Engage, Maitree) that strengthen feminist movements, advance child rights, prevent early marriage, address domestic violence, and engage in dialogues on masculinity. We contribute through monthly meetings, event design, surveys, and leading network-based initiatives. This reflects our belief that collaborative action builds solidarity and creates lasting change. We were also invited to be part of local networks and stakeholders meets organized sub divisional police in Birbbhum and DCPO, Siuri to combat early marriage and teenage pregnancy.

Capacity Development

- Team members attended 17 exposure meets and events organized by NGOs, govt bodies where they contributed and expanded their perspectives.
- 8 team members went through 13 counseling and personal growth sessions to deal with personal and work-related stressors and triggers.
- We also build capacities of 4 NGOs- Calcutta Rescue, Solidaridad, Loreto House, NOSKK on gender and partnering approach.

Team Retreat

Objective: To reflect on ourselves as individuals and as professionals, while also exploring ways to strengthen our capacities and skills.

Equidiversity Foundation has been organizing annual team retreats since 2022. The first retreat was held at Mandarboni in 2022, followed by Jhandi village, Darjeeling in 2023. In 2024, the retreat took place in the Lataguri forests of Jalpaiguri from 2nd–7th October, with 32 team members participating.



Like every year, the retreat combined teamwork, group sessions, facilitation, and excursions. A special highlight of this year was celebrating roles and responsibilities within the team. A democratic process was introduced to recognize contributions under categories such as: Best Leadership, Best Inspiration, Emerging Leadership, Best Team Member, Best Case Worker, and Best Mobilizer. Candidates showcased their roles and responsibilities through different formats, including PowerPoint presentations and digital storytelling, and were selected based on these presentations. This initiative encouraged greater ownership and motivation among team members.
Overall, the retreat provided valuable space for collective reflection, shared learning, and collaborative planning while strengthening team spirit.

Challenges

Beyond operational difficulties, our work revealed deeper, systemic challenges that influence adolescents' engagement, decision-making, and well-being:

- Navigating Adolescence and Emerging Sexuality: A few cases of elopement or early romantic decisions amongst our youth members highlight that adolescents are still learning to balance their emerging sexual desires and emotional needs with parental expectations and social norms. This indicates a gap in guidance around healthy relationships, consent, and emotional literacy.
- Economic Pressures vs. Educational Aspirations: Many adolescents, especially boys face tension between family expectations to contribute financially and their own aspirations for education and personal growth. This conflict contributes to dropouts, irregular participation, and disengagement from structured programs. In South 24 Parganas, we found that after the Secondary and Higher Secondary examinations, about 21% of boys (45 members) from youth groups shifted towards income-generating work due to family pressure. This led to a decline in group membership and reduced the frequency of sessions.
- Societal Norms Around Marriage: Child and early marriage continue to reflect entrenched societal and familial pressures. Adolescents often have limited agency, and even those married within their communities face unclear pathways for continued learning and engagement. For example, in South 24 Parganas, approximately 15.5% of adolescent girl members (33 girls) were married before the age of 18—some under family pressure and others by

personal choice—and many relocated to different areas, resulting in irregular attendance and challenges in follow-up.

- Limited Access to Safe Creative Spaces: Retaining adolescents through formal sessions alone is challenging, as they need informal, safe, and engaging spaces to explore identities, skills, and creativity. Lack of such opportunities can reduce motivation and participation.
- Capacity Gaps in Youth Leadership Programs: New initiatives like the fellowship program revealed that young mentors themselves require structured guidance and capacity-building to effectively support peers. Inadequate preparation and external pressures (academics, household responsibilities) can limit program impact.
- Environmental and Structural Barriers: External factors such as extreme heat, scattered tuition schedules, and inconsistent infrastructure continue to shape how and when adolescents can participate, underscoring the importance of flexible program design.

Learnings

✨ Vision: A supportive ecosystem where adolescents thrive through education, creativity, safe relationships, and leadership opportunities.

Navigating Adolescence & Emerging Sexuality

- More sessions on sexual & emotional health, consent, and healthy relationships.
- Parent awareness programs, especially inter-generational dialogues to reduce anxiety & build supportive homes.
- Confidential counselling & peer mentoring for emotional guidance.



Economic Pressures vs. Educational Aspirations

- Financial literacy & livelihood guidance aligned with education.
- Mentorship for adolescents & families on long-term career planning.

Societal Norms Around Marriage

- Community campaigns promoting delayed marriage & girls' education.
- Continued outreach & peer networks for married adolescents.
- Advocacy for policies enabling safe spaces & learning opportunities.

Limited Access to Safe Creative Spaces

- Informal clubs, creative workshops & skill-building.
- Safe, inclusive, accessible spaces for exploration & leadership.
- Co-designed programs reflecting adolescents' interests & aspirations.

Capacity Gaps in Youth Leadership

- Structured training for fellows and EDF Team on planning, mentoring & facilitation.
- Regular check-ins, peer learning circles & guidance.
- Retention strategies & support systems to reduce dropouts.

Environmental & Structural Barriers

- Weather/timing-sensitive schedules with indoor & hybrid options.
- Flexible program design aligned with adolescents' availability.