

# Using sport to empower adolescent girls to challenge gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination

## New Alipore Praajak Development Society (Praajak), India

### THE CONTEXT IN INDIA

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- Child abuse and violence are prevalent across all socioeconomic groups and affect both girls and boys. The National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) found that 148,185 crimes against children were reported during 2019.<sup>14</sup> Over 35 per cent were sexual offences, including rape.
- Migrant children are at high risk of sexual abuse and trafficking. Many live in slums with very limited education or work opportunities. For girls, child marriage is common, and many are never sent to school, instead being sent to beg or work.
- Praajak's field level staff (project animators) believe that three out of five households in project communities witness domestic violence against children and child abuse, from physical to emotional; corporal punishment is normalised. During the pandemic, Praajak has come across 15 cases of sexual abuse: 14 were of girls and one a boy.

- Girls' mobility is severely restricted due to their parents' fear of sexual assault if girls are outside unaccompanied by a male or an older female. There are few occasions when girls are allowed to go out; these include going to school, to visit relatives or to perform household chores. When visiting relatives, girls are always accompanied by an adult. To go to school, families allow girls to move, preferably in groups. In carrying out household chores, girls do move from their immediate neighbourhood but community elders keep a close watch. There are also strict curfews about how long a girl is allowed to stay out on a normal school day. Going outside to play on a public playing field is an unusual activity for girls.

### THE PRACTICE: KABBADI FOR EMPOWERMENT

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This is Praajak's flagship programme with and for adolescent girls and it started before COVID-19. Kabaddi is a popular team contact sport in India. It builds team cohesion, cooperation and collaboration and is resource-light, requiring little space, training or equipment, and is therefore easy and affordable for poor communities. Kabaddi is typically associated with boys but Praajak's efforts have shown that it is accessible for girls. It has proved to be an effective way to tackle deeply

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14 <https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII%202019%20Volume%201.pdf>

entrenched gender stereotypes and open up healthy dialogue about gender roles.

Kabaddi is used as a 'hook' for participation and provides girls with a platform to work together, to learn about education and other services available to them, and to speak confidently about issues they face. Girls are encouraged to take part in weekly pathachakras (study circles) run by animators. Here they discuss and reflect on gender norms and gendered socio-cultural practices, gender-based stigma, discrimination and violence, patriarchy and family structure, issues faced during adolescence, institutions like marriage and motherhood, and gender equity and how to achieve it. Girls' experiences while playing kabaddi and in their families and their communities are linked to these concepts and ideas.

The girls who take part are aged 12 to 18 and are affected by unsafe migration and harmful social practices. The programme also works with parents so that the girls' families also understand that they need to change their behaviour and their perspective.

## HOW THE PRACTICE WAS IMPLEMENTED

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The programme is based on six phases of training with specific objectives which follow a logical order. Praajak animators coach the girls. Coaches from the Kabaddi Association are sometimes involved in training but focus only on the development of skills and stamina.

### Phase 1 – Trust building

For effective team performance, girls need to develop mutual trust in a safe environment. The team get to know the space, their peers and their coaches while the coaches build on the group formation dynamics. As trust builds, the team begins to develop a unified vision, with clear rules and norms. Each participant feels part of a team and feels respected and enthusiastic. While this relates to the sport, the girls also learn how

to communicate about their challenges and stand up for themselves, helping them to become more able to protect themselves.

### Phase 2 – Collaboration

The coach works to engage the girls collaboratively as a team. They start feeling more connected as a group, allowing them to form a solid bond and perform effectively together.

### Phase 3 – Communication

The coach supports the team to develop communication and active listening skills. They start choosing positive ways to communicate, and learn about the importance of equality during communication, enabling them to naturally adopt appropriate verbal and behavioural communication styles. They realise that communication is key for protecting both themselves and their peers. Being able to ask for help, communicate distress and intervene for others is the first step towards stopping and preventing violence or bringing perpetrators to justice.

### Phase 4 – Managing emotions

The girls learn to manage and regulate their emotions. With emotional intelligence they can understand their own and other people's feelings and manage social relationships. Feeling safe and confident involves managing feelings of insecurity, accepting one's situation and dealing with frustration. This helps the girls react appropriately to challenging situations, in particular related to self-protection, while facing risk, being in uncomfortable situations, and witnessing abuse.

### Phase 5 – Enabling creative and critical thinking

The team is encouraged to develop creative thinking skills, essential for managing conflict and social challenges. In critical situations, a person should be able to make a quick and informed decision. Creative thinking helps the girls identify and respond to potentially challenging and dangerous situations; it is also essential for conflict resolution, problem solving and establishing healthy relationships.

## Phase 6 – Assuming responsibility

Responsibility is learned through physical exercise and the distribution of tasks among group members. This helps the girls to develop internal motivation and the capacity to take responsibility for their lives and the development of their communities.

### HOW THE PRACTICE WAS CONDUCTED IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

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From March 2020 to October 2020 all kabaddi activities were suspended because of COVID-19 restrictions. Animators kept in close contact with the girls and their communities through regular phone calls and other virtual means. Praajak provided families with food rations and health and hygiene kits. When the practice restarted in October 2020, all COVID-19 protocols were followed during practice and matches.

### IMPACT

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- More than 2,000 children and their families from 60 migrant communities reported a reduction in violence or no violence against girls who attended the programme. This programme was launched before COVID-19, and it reaped outcomes during COVID-19 with fewer reports on domestic violence against children. Beatings and verbal abuse by fathers and brothers have stopped in the majority of cases. A total of 15 cases of sexual assault/sexual abuse were reported during the COVID-19 pandemic: 14 females and one male.
- Girls are more confident now in the knowledge that they have a strong support system. In many cases, perpetrators acknowledged the growing confidence of the girls and their mothers and yielded space to them, especially after they realised that their membership of collectives and their access to support networks have made them stronger.

- Girls reported improved life skills and negotiating skills and said that they had been able to resolve issues through dialogue in their families. Girls were able to leave their homes freely to participate in practice sessions three times a week. They also worked towards attending the annual kabaddi competition held in Kolkata, although due to COVID-19 regulations a smaller number of girls and parents were able to attend than would usually have been the case. Being able to wear trousers and T-shirts during games was quite a feat for the girls, especially those from Muslim communities, as this is usually taboo. To leave home for practice and to wear trousers and T-shirts girls had to negotiate with their families and be able to withstand pressure from the community.
- Many fathers and other male family members acknowledged the girls' growing confidence and recognised their valuable advice on family issues. This increased the girls' value in the eyes of the family leading to a mellowing down of otherwise intimidating male behaviour.
- On average it takes about four to five months to see a reduction or absence of violence in the family.

### WHY THE PRACTICE WAS EFFECTIVE

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- Weekly study circles with both girls and boys gave space for regular conversations about issues around gender, patriarchy, mental well-being and life skills. These sessions were interspersed with community events and awareness campaigns on gender-based violence and exploitation including child abuse, child marriage and child trafficking. Boys and girls became able to challenge gender norms and stereotypes within their families, negotiating for changes in behaviour with their family members and communities and speaking out where they could when gender-based rights were violated.

- As kabaddi is a traditional, male-dominated sport, taking part was an effective way for girls to increase their confidence, challenge gender stereotypes and become more aware of how to assert their rights.
- The programme helps girls to initiate a dialogue within their families, with their peers and then work as collectives within the community to raise awareness, spread information and intervene with the support of sensitive adults and Praajak when there are instances of the violation of rights and gender-based discrimination and violence.
- Instances of abuse and violence often come up in the study circles. The animators discuss this further with the girl to see whether she would like support from Praajak. If she does, animators either speak to her in depth or refer her to a counsellor. If the girl is ready to talk to a non-offending/non-abusive adult whom she trusts, in her family or in the community, the animators/counsellor take that person into confidence and together work out how to approach the problem. There is no pre-set solution and the priority is to make sure that the girl who has reported an incident does not suffer further because of this.
- Study circles are conducted with the principles of restorative justice in mind. Sometimes, study circles are encouraged to be held between the girl, her immediate non-offending/non-abusive caregivers, the offender, the offender's relatives and community members to ensure a resolution which does not compromise the girl's rights and dignity.

## **Case study: ending violence against women through kabaddi**



One of the girls reported violence at home. The Praajak animator initiated a conversation and a trust building exercise with her mother. Over a few weeks, the girl's mother confided in the animator about several incidents of violence she faced from her husband.

The animator shared stories of how domestic violence had been tackled by others in similar positions. This helped the girl's mother to strengthen herself psychologically. They also discussed what the girl had learned from the study circle about how physical abuse violates rights.

The girl soon started to voice her protest when her father beat her mother and was supported by her mother. When her father threatened the girl with physical violence, she said that she would scream and tell the neighbours what he was doing to her mother. Her father said that if she dared to do that, he would beat her up too. However, since then, violence has significantly reduced and mother and daughter have stood together against tolerating any violence. The girl says that attending the gender sessions steeled her resolve to stand up against the violence and that her membership of the collective, along with the personal confidence she developed playing kabaddi, gave her the courage to stand up to the violence and confidence to fight for herself.