

Boundary-Breaking Girls

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Basamma

Basamma has a soft, pretty face with glowing hazel eyes and a shy smile. She looks too young to be a mother to three teenage children, but when I discover that she became a mother at the age of thirteen, it makes more sense.

Her story, whilst extraordinary, is not unusual in the Koppal district of northern Karnataka. By the age of three months, Basamma was 'betrothed' to her uncle, a common occurrence in a district where the majority of the marriages take place within extended family. By the age of twelve, as soon as she had reached puberty, she was sent to the house of her in-laws and, one year later, gave birth to their first child. Though marriage in India is officially not legal till the age of eighteen, 70% of girls beneath the age of 18 marry before that in Basamma's village. Basamma describes her life as one of 'struggle', being thrust into marriage and motherhood at such a young age. And yet, despite this, for many years she assumed that her two daughters would - even should - go through the same thing. The possibility of a different route for them within a patriarchal society where such actions are considered normal, did not even occur to her.

Koppal district has, for many years, ranked second lowest in North Karnataka on the development scale. In a district with a particularly high population of adolescents, money has traditionally been spent on sending boys to school far more than girls, as this is considered a waste of money. As such, with both female school dropout and child marriage rates high, it was clear that a change in attitude was desperately needed, but what was the answer?

KHPT Intervention - Project Spoorthi

Towards the end of 2015, KHPT intervened as part of their Project Sphoorthi and began to seek out 14-15 year old girls to be trained as adolescent girl role models. In an area where inspiring females to look up to and break the mould of school dropout and early marriage are thin on the ground, these dynamic young girls have become a force to be reckoned with. Paired up with fellow adolescent girls from the village, including those who have dropped out of school, the goals of the project are threefold: to increase secondary school completion, to reduce the number of girls who marry before the age of eighteen and to increase nutrition levels in an area where around half of girls aged 10-19 are anaemic.

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Some girls at the receiving end of KHPT's Project Spoorthi intervention

communication and negotiation skills. The latter has proved invaluable, assisting the girls with bargaining power when discussing options with parents and expressing a desire to stay in school and postpone marriage. The girls also attend 3-day leadership camps, learning - amongst other things

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These girls have been so inspired by what they experience on the residential camps that when they return home, cases have been known whereby they run similar activities for the girls in their villages, modelled on what they have learnt. KHPT has also facilitated 'exposure visits', a night away for the girls and their parents to cities in Karnataka. During this time, the girls can interact with female role models such as policewomen, female entrepreneurs and sports women, to help recognise what can be achieved. As a result of such visits, a number of parents have been known to agree to keep their daughters in school, Basamma being a case in point. In fact, her firmly-held beliefs changed over the course of a single weekend in Mysuru, thanks to her feisty middle child.

SHIVALEELA: HER IMPACT

Reluctant at first to even go on the trip, fourteen-year old Shivaleela convinced her mother to take part. With her expressive gestures, impish smile, infectious enthusiasm and dynamic personality, it's not difficult to understand how Shivaleela was chosen to be a female role model in her community. Convincing her mother to attend the exposure visit could just have been the most important event to take place in their family. Not only does Basamma say that it opened her eyes to opportunities for her daughter she'd never previously conceived possible, but she and her husband, Ramanna, have now become role model parents. Once a month they, along with other parents, meet to discuss matters ranging from gender equality, the importance of education and how best to reach out to others within the community to recognise the importance of keeping their daughters in school and not marrying young. Shivaleela has also convinced her family to invest in a toilet and others in their village are now following suit.

CHALLENGES

Even with the initiation of girl role models, challenges still abound. I was told that a number of these girls, as wholeheartedly as they may throw themselves into their roles, still marry below the age of eighteen. There are many reasons why girls leave school early, such as pressure from parents to marry, traditional beliefs, fear for the security of the girl child, the desires of the girls themselves, a lack of confidence in academic abilities and sickness, leading to a fear they will be unable to catch up. It quickly became evident to KHPT that in order for their interventions to prove effective, not only is the support of the girls' families needed, but the entire community, including key community leaders to help foster positive gender roles. Shivaleela's parents may be on board, but it can take far longer for other families to come round.

Generally speaking, the fathers of the girls are the most difficult to convince: often they do not want to attend these meetings as there is a sense that they are 'losing face' in front of other men from the community. Therefore, the meetings tend to take place in a neighbouring village where they are not known as well. Fathers of the girl role models are brought together separately to discuss the



Breaking down gender stereotypes with school-age boys

themselves attend the meetings in order to play games and bond with their fathers and talk about challenges in a safe environment. In a society in which girls often have a distanced relationship with their fathers, this has been ground-breaking.

KHPT is also working with boys from the communities, to help break down gender stereotypes and initiate important conversations around acceptable behaviour towards girls. The neighbourhood boys are given sports

balls and bags, but as this has proved such a challenging group to work with (not helped by the jealousy many boys feel towards this new attention given to the girls in a society that traditionally favours boys), the government have been providing support to work in schools with this target group.

What's next?

Ever since Basamma travelled to Mysuru with her daughter and many other girl role models and their mothers, she has never looked back. She and her husband have high expectations for Shivaleela; that one day she will become a teacher or a lawyer. When I ask Shivaleela about this, she hoots with laughter, her eyes sparkling. 'No way!' she cries, 'I'm going to be a singer!' What is certain is that the status quo is changing. In the penultimate census, 51% of females who married in Koppal taluka were below the age of eighteen. Yet in the last census, this number had lowered to 32%. Headmasters in local secondary schools have noted the huge increase in confidence amongst girls since Project Sphoorthi began as well as attendance and grades improvement. Whichever path Shivaleela chooses to take, the future holds a whole lot more opportunities for her and hundreds of girls like her across northern Karnataka.

