

KEY THEMES FROM THE GIRLS ADVISORY COUNCIL

KEY THEME 1: ENGAGING WITH PARENTS

This came up as the single most common theme on suggested improvements amongst all of the smaller working groups as well as in the larger group discussion. The girls felt that their parents are their biggest gatekeepers and if organisations engaged more frequently with parents, the girls' chances of success would be higher.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Frequent communication (at least every 2 months).**
- **Sharing the curriculum with parents**
- **Changing the medium of communication**
- **Inviting parents into training sessions**
- **Targeted training and exposure sessions for parents**

Things that organisations can do to engage with parents more effectively.

SENSITISING PARENTS TO THE PROJECT / PROGRAM

- 1) **For livelihoods programs:** Parents and the community need to be mobilised / sensitised to the issue of girls working. The biggest reason for girls dropping out of livelihoods programs is because their parents do not believe that they should be working and can be addressed if there is a focussed intervention with parents throughout the girls' training (tea/coffee meetings to tell parents what their daughters are learning). The key is for this to happen at the very beginning and for parents to be invited (into trainings/ parent meetings etc.) at least every 2 months.
- 2) **For education programs:** One of the biggest inhibitors to school completion is child marriage, therefore addressing the illegality of this should be one of the first things that education programs speak about with the girls and with their parents.
 - Parents and girls should have combined sessions to understand
 - that it is illegal to get married before the age of 18
 - It is illegal to stop school under RTE, below the age of 14
 - A police officer, school principal or local official should conduct these meetings. If someone in power speaks to the community (not just NGO staff) then parents are more likely to listen. The NGO should focus on getting a respected village elder or local official to run the meetings.
 - Another option is to get a respected outsider (someone famous, someone from abroad, someone who holds a high post and has a lot of power or money, this could also be an alumni who has been successful) to speak to the parents.
- 3) Parent meetings should be held at the very beginning so that they understand the program and its importance for their daughters. This can be done by:

- Using street plays to explain the importance of education
 - Having frequent, structured parent meetings
 - Inviting them to the first few trainings and having meetings with them from the very beginning. If the NGO gives parents respect at the very beginning they will be more likely to support their daughters.
- 4) NGOs should speak to the parents so that parents understand what the program is – and then agree to send their children. If NGOs speak to the parents at the beginning and chart the full journey / expectations of the program and share the full curriculum of the program, then drop out will likely be much less.

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

- 1) There needs to be a change in the medium of information conveyed to parents about activities undertaken. Often organisations provide written documentation about the program, however, many parents can't read or write – so using photos and videos will be a lot more effective than printed materials. Many parents have smartphones so a short video that can be whatsapped to them by the NGO would be most effective.
- 2) Information conveyed to parents should be every 2 months, from the very beginning of the intervention. Often parents are invited at the very end of an intervention and they usually support the intervention at this time. But parents congratulating their daughters at the end of an intervention has less meaning than supporting them at the beginning, because parents are usually the biggest inhibitors to girls being able to partake in programs. If parents were invited to an event in the first few months of the intervention, then it would be a lot easier for girls to be part of these programs.
- 3) Parents should be involved in activities (not just the end of year celebrations). They should be invited to events / showcases and exhibitions throughout the program duration.

INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY

- 1) In order to get community buy-in the following things can be done:
 - Community members should also be invited to awards functions and activities
 - Local officials and community elders should be invited to parents meetings and events in the school.
- 2) One of the biggest issues is that elders in the community believe that girls shouldn't study (even though parents sometimes want to support their daughters). Many parents come under pressure from community elders to pull their daughters out of school and marry their girls off. This is even more of an issue if girls are harassed going to and from school. Then community elders say that it is because your adolescent girl is in public that she is being harassed, therefore the logical solution in their eyes is to discontinue school and arrange her marriage.
 - Transport to and from school is one of the most important things that a school completion program can arrange.
 - It is vital for these programs to address the issue of eve teasing on the way to, and in schools

KEY THEME 2: CONNECTING GIRLS TO GOVERNMENT SCHEMES / FACILITATING PAPERWORK

Girls asserted that there are many government schemes, benefits and incentives that they are eligible for but they do not know about them or do not know how to access them. The girls felt that if their organisations provided them with insight and guidance into these schemes then they would use them and benefit from them.

KEY THEMES

- **Provide a list of schemes that girls (and their families) are eligible for**
 - **Facilitate the process of accessing these schemes by helping girls' complete forms / applications etc.**
- 1) There are many government schemes that are available to women and many of the girls do not even know about them. NGOs should provide awareness of schemes and benefits that girls could use (loans, saving, skill India, government training programs) – and have one person who can help girls fill out forms, access loans and government training schemes.
 - 2) For some of the girls who want to start their own business, NGOs should facilitate loans for small scale industry in the house. Either through government schemes, private banks or the NGO could provide a small bridge loan to the girls.
 - 3) Finances and home conditions should be considered. There are a lot of girls who need to work to make ends meet and a lot of parents who want to send their daughters to school but cannot afford the supplemental costs (bag, shoes, uniform etc.)
 - NGOs should help girls understand which government scholarships are available for these things.
 - They should also provide information and help on the free schemes available to girls (free bikes, laptops etc.) from the government. Many girls do not know that these schemes are available and even if they do, they do not know how to apply.
 - 4) For girls beyond grade 8, it is very tough to understand the steps involved in filling out admissions forms.
 - NGOs should help girls with their admission forms and walk them through the steps involved in the process.

KEY THEME 3: BEGINNING EARLY

One of the things girls highlighted was the fact that programs often begin too late, when young people's minds have already been conditioned to the status quo. They spoke out about how it is vital to begin engagement early so that young people's mind sets can be broadened and before they have taken decisions about their education/careers.

Key themes:

- **Exposure to livelihoods and education options at an early age, so that girls can choose their career and educational line based on what they are interested in as opposed to what they are expected to do.**
 - **Begin work on changing mind sets before thought processes are firmly ingrained in personalities.**
 - **Sensitize parents and the community to co-ed programs by beginning co-ed interventions in early adolescence.**
- 1) **In livelihoods:** Exposure to different trades early on is important because girls do not know what they are interested in (they are always told that they need to consider only a few trades). Therefore, if at an early age, you work on changing girls' mind-sets to non-stereotypical professions then girls can choose a trade that they are genuinely interested in as opposed to what they are expected to do. If this is not done at an early age then girls are conditioned to only like / be interested in trades like cooking, stitching etc. Additionally, why do we assume that traditional is not as good as non-traditional? In many ways, we are perpetuating the stereotype that boys' work is better than girls' work. We should position non-traditional work by saying that girls can engage in these alternative trades if they are interested, not because they are better than the trades that girls traditionally engage in.
 - 2) **In Education:** Often girls choose subjects based on what other (older) girls have studied. They often go into arts, home economics and other such subjects because they believe that is what they are expected to do. If girls are exposed to commerce and science early (before they have to make a decision of which stream to follow) then they might choose a stream that girls usually do not choose.
 - 3) **When working with boys:** The most important thing to address is boys' mentality: in order to do this you have to start working with boys at a young age (sometimes 15-16 is too late and you can't undo this mentality).
 - 4) **Co-ed programs:** Some parents will have issue with co-ed programs when girls are over a certain age, say 14-15. The way to solve this is by beginning the co-ed program early, like age 10-11.

KEY THEME 4: COUNSELLOR / SUPPORT

Several of the smaller working groups spoke about the need for counselling, this became a key topic in the larger group discussion with the girls and also in the presentations to organisational representatives.

Key themes:

- **There are several issues that the girls are dealing with outside of the core program and these are often barriers to their success. Therefore, counselling is a key component to ensuring girls' success**
 - **Issues do not disappear once girls are trained, they often persist even when they have completed the program. Therefore, it is vital to provide counselling support to alumni as well.**
- 1) Support after the technical training is complete is vital as getting a job is only the beginning and girls still face problems and issues with our family and the community long after training is complete. The solution is hiring a full time counsellor who girls can communicate with by setting up meeting times during and after program completion.
 - 2) There should be a counsellor that the girls can go to with their family problems. There are many things that girls have to face and they do not know what to do – which often results in dropping out of the program or dropping out of school. Ideally this person should not be the regular teacher at the school, but rather someone who they can speak to in confidence.
 - 3) Create a space where girls can come and speak about their issues to counsellors or community members.

KEY THEME 5: CREATING A GIRLS ONLY SPACE

This is a topic that came up in the education centred working groups. The girls stated that it is vital to provide a safe space for girls to network and more importantly for them to complete their homework. One of the biggest issues that they raised was that they find it difficult to work at home because they are often pulled into chores / housework during the time that they are meant to be completing their homework.

KEY THEMES

- **Create a drop in space within the community so that girls can complete their homework in these locations and have a space of their own.**
- 1) There should be a room / space within the community where girls can come at any time to complete their homework and spend time with one another. Otherwise, it is very difficult for girls to complete their homework or practice their new skills.
 - 2) Girls often cannot complete their homework at home, because when they are seen sitting 'idle' at home they are expected to contribute to housework. Therefore, the girls propose having a drop in centre which is open to all during certain hours of the day so that the girls can drop in and complete their homework. It is because girls cannot complete their homework that they often fall behind in class.

KEY THEME 6: TEACHERS AND TRAINERS

This is a theme that came up in most of the smaller working groups. The girls stated that there is no point in preaching gender equality if the trainers in the program practice gender discrimination and that sometimes it is difficult to communicate with teachers about their concerns.

KEY THEMES

- **Teachers need to be gender aware and be trained not to discriminate between boys and girls**
- **Clear spaces, times and protocol should be established so that girls can communicate with their teachers and trainers (and not be afraid to reach out to them.)**
- **One of the first sessions in any program should be a description of the whole curriculum for the year so that the girls are aware of their journey within the program.**

Things that organisations can do to better the relationship between teachers and the girls.

TRAINING

- 1) There is often gender discrimination in schools by teachers (ie that only girls have to clean the classroom or only boys are called upon in class or teachers actually teach that girls should stay at home and look after children etc.)
 - o It is important to work with teachers and schools to ensure equal respect for boys and girls
 - o Teachers should provide additional help to girls who may be falling behind because of their responsibilities at home
 - o Boys should also be sensitized by teachers within the school environment and learn to not discriminate against girls or even tease them, and there should be repercussions if they harass girls.
- 2) Investments should be made to train the teachers (specifically that the teachers need to be trained to recognise that boys and girls are equal). There is no point in running these programs if the teachers are not trained effectively.

COMMUNICATIONS

- 1) Teachers should open up the space for students to communicate with them. Often times, teachers do not listen to their students and students find it tough to raise their concerns to the teachers.
- 2) Teachers and students should have an open channel of communication about the curriculum with the girls (i.e. what is the plan / program for the year etc.) and this should be communicated in the first session. Oftentimes, girls feel that they do not have the complete picture of the program at the beginning and are confused about the point of the program.

KEY THEME 7: ENGAGING WITH ALUMNI / ALUMNI AS TRAINERS

The girls actively spoke out about how alumni girls are the best community mobilisers and trainers, because they know exactly what the girls are going through in every step of the training and can serve as role models for girls within the program and for the community at large

KEY THEMES

- **Engage alumni in community mobilisation**
 - **Hire alumni as trainers**
- 1) Alumni girls need to be involved in mobilisation visit the community so that parents and community members can see what alumni girls are doing. When they see successful girls, then they will be more supportive of their own daughters. In many ways alumni girls become role models within the community mobilisation.
 - 2) Alumni girls need to be involved in training and become trainers to the girls because they know the challenges faced by girls more than anyone else.

KEY THEME 8: LIVELIHOODS: ENGAGING WITH EMPLOYERS

The girls addressed the issue of planning employability and employment programs by strongly stating that the first step for any organisation planning such a program is to conduct a market mapping of which employers are out there and what skill set they are looking for. Often times, reaching out to employers is done after training has commenced and there is a mismatch between the skills that girls possess and that the market is looking for.

KEY THEMES

- **Connect with potential employers and create a database of job opportunities available**
 - **Speak to potential employers to ask them what skills they are looking for, before planning the curriculum.**
- 1) NGOs need to connect with employers / corporates and opportunities must be shared with girls so they know what they would like to be trained in. Often girls begin learning a trade and when they are looking for a job they find out that there aren't many jobs in that field, or that they haven't been trained in the specific things that the employer is looking for.
 - 2) Need to collaborate with companies (first) so that girls are taught the skills that companies require. It is important to understand what companies want before the training is designed. Otherwise there is a gap when girls begin working.

KEY THEME 9: WHO ARE THE YOUNG PEOPLE YOU ARE WORKING WITH?

The girls spoke out about the fact that there are several people who are left out of the training program because of the scope (ie only limiting programs to girls, or only limiting programs to girls in school.) They suggest that NGOs consider expanding the scope of whom they are working with.

KEY THEMES

- **Reach out to the LGBTQ community**
 - **Reach out to girls who have been married early / have had children early because it is not their fault that they are not in school or aren't in the position to access trainings.**
- 1) NGOs should also consider working with girls who are out of school / married early / at home. They should consider homebased work or open school for girls who have lost out at opportunities because of choices that were made for them (i.e. early marriage and child bearing). They should not be excluded from education or livelihoods opportunities.
 - 2) NGO's should think about increasing their scope of work with different genders (trans community) and with the LGBTQ community, training programs shouldn't be just girls focussed.

KEY THEME 10: FOCUSING ON OUR MINDS

All of the groups raised the fact that before any form of technical training, the girls have to work on their own minds first. This includes gaining self-confidence, recognising the importance of education and work and most importantly, making choices for themselves.

KEY THEMES

- **Goal setting, vision building, building self-confidence and**
 - **Girls should have exposure to the opportunities that are out there so that they can make a decision about which career / educational stream to pursue based on their personal goals and personality. However, that cannot happen unless girls look inwards to understand what they are passionate about.**
- 1) **For Livelihoods:** It is vital to have training at the very beginning on vision building, goal setting and career counselling– so that girls know what they want to pursue. If this isn't done, then sometimes girls get trained in a skill/trade that they do not like or are pigeonholed into a trade because of who they are.
 - 2) **For livelihoods:** In addition to the skill being taught, we need more sessions on leadership skills, financial literacy, goal setting and building self-confidence.
 - 3) **For education:** Many girls do not understand the importance of education themselves. Therefore, at the beginning, girls should be made aware about why it is important for them to study and what their life will look like if they do not.
 - 4) **For lifeskills:** Before embarking on any life skills program it is important to focus on building the self-confidence of girls, focus on goal setting and problem solving. These are the tools needed for girls to be able to perform well in life. If girls do not have these tools, then they will not be successful.

KEY THEME 11: WORKING WITH BOYS

All of the girls worked on this topic together. They came up with a list of sessions that they believe are vital when working with boys.

KEY THEMES

- **Boys need to step into girls' shoes to understand what the impact of boys actions upon girls is.**
 - **Masculinity / patriarchy training should be at the centre of all boys' trainings**
 - **Girls do not want sympathy or protection, they want a change in the behaviour and mind sets of boys.**
 - **What should be spoken about (and often isn't) is the impact of boys actions upon girls (ie girls being pulled out of school, their honor being questioned etc.)**
 - **Parents should be involved in trainings about discrimination and the effect that it has upon girls.**
- 1) Co-ed sessions are very important, so that boys can recognise and appreciate the issues that girls face. If boys are trained alone and girls are trained alone then this will never happen.
 - 2) Session idea: Patriarchy / masculinity needs to be redefined. This should be at the centre of all programs working with boys because they do not realise their privilege.
 - 3) Session idea: Behaviour training – what is central to this is not that boys should give girls sympathy for their situation (in society) but boys should change their behaviour to treat girls as they deserve to be treated
 - 4) Session idea: Physical knowledge – boys should learn about their own anatomy and girls' anatomy as well. They should learn about menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth as well as about their own bodies and bodily changes.
 - 5) Session idea: Focus on safety training rather than security training. Boys should not be taught to protect girls but rather they should take active measures to make the community safer. This can be done through co-ed safety mapping, petitioning for more lighting, removing bikes and groups of boys loitering on the road.
 - 6) Session idea: boys should understand how girls are discriminated against. They can learn this through role plays, street plays and activities so that they understand what it feels like to be discriminated against.
 - 7) All boys programs should also involve parents in some activities as well. Making parents aware about issues around gender discrimination, safety and patriarchy should come from both girls and boys.
 - 8) Sessions with boys should also include specific discrimination that girls face when applying for a job. And even when girls get a job – there are very different standards about travelling to work, taking time off (girls are made to stay at home when friends and relatives visit).
 - 9) Session idea: in order to foster equality girls should lead some sessions or trainings for boys and boys should lead some sessions and training for girls (ie. play a sport, training in a skill etc.)
 - 10) Boys are not punished, but girls are. This should be addressed at the beginning to both boys and girls. Boys need to understand the consequences of their actions upon the lives of girls, such as being pulled out of school, being beaten and their honour being called into question.

KEY THEME 12: GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

A smaller focus group worked on the issue of gender based violence and then it was brought to the larger group for discussion as it affects all of the thematic areas.

KEY THEMES

- **Focus on rights and recourse (do not talk about the problem without talking about the solution).**
 - **Involve parents and the community in speaking about gender based violence so that other stakeholders understand not only the effect of GBV upon girls (and the opportunities that they lose), but also what they can do if a girl is being harassed.**
 - **Sports are a great way to teach girls about their bodies and their rights.**
- 1) Violence in the home, sexuality education and health education should be taught alongside our rights in these areas. There is no point in talking about the issues unless you know what the law is and also how to address these issues effectively (don't talk about the problem without talking about the solution.) Sessions should focus on girls' rights and recourse if their rights are being compromised, including publicising with women's helpline number.
 - 2) Girls do not get their right to education because of GBV. They are mostly pulled out of school because of concerns about their safety. Therefore, it is important to address why GBV occurs to mitigate school dropout. One of the biggest reasons that girls drop out of the workforce is because of concerns about their safety. The solution is to conduct safety audits in the community, build awareness through street plays and poster rallies.
 - 3) Very important to talk about bodily changes and periods because often girls will get their period and not understand what is happening to them. Additionally, girls often experience violence during their periods and that is rarely spoken about. In order to address this, mothers and daughters need to be taught about periods at the same time.
 - 4) The community needs to be mobilised to stop gender based violence this can happen through street plays where the people who are coming to watch also take part in the street play (and engage with the people performing) So that they understand the consequences of GBV upon girls and what they (as a community) need to do if they see a girl being harassed.
 - 5) Sports are a great way to teach girls about their bodies. Engaging in sports to speak about gender based violence creates a space where girls are confident and aren't afraid to speak out about their bodies.

KEY THEME 13: ACCESS TO MATERIALS

Some of the girls highlighted the difficulties that they face when there aren't enough resource materials for the whole class.

KEY THEMES

- **Allocate specific times for each girl to work on the computer**
 - **Make photocopies of resource materials so that each girl has her own book/ materials.**
- 1) 4-5 girls to one computer does not work. Each girl should have an allocated time where she can operate the computer alone.
 - 2) All students should have their own book / materials – these can even be photocopies of the book. Sharing is sometimes not conducive to learning, especially if everyone who is sharing reads at a different speed.