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# CARVING ADOLESCENT-FRIENDLY SPACES

THE EXPERIENCE OF DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT FRIENDLY WARDS IN **KOLKATA**

# CONTEXT

The vision for setting up **Adolescent Friendly Wards for adolescent empowerment** took wings in November 2016. UNICEF drew upon the rich international legacy of the **Child Friendly Cities** movement and galvanised multiple stakeholders through an integrative programming approach to make adolescent rights and entitlements a reality in urban disadvantaged municipal wards. Adolescent rights are provisioned under various flagship development schemes and programmes, particularly Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SmSA), Kanyashree Prakalpa, Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) and Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) (erstwhile SABLA).

The initiative was implemented with the active encouragement and support of the Hon'ble Minister of State, Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare (DWCD&SW) and Chairperson, West Bengal State Commission for Protection of Child Rights. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) constituted a key partner as the local governance platform and Ward Councillors in particular were dynamically invested. Other support agencies from the Government of West Bengal (GoWB) were the Directorate of Child Rights and Trafficking and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Department of Technical Education, Training and Skill Development and the School Education Department. Cooperation was also received from Kolkata Police, West Bengal Legal Services Authorities and Department of Health and Family Welfare. The active participation of NGOs like CRY, Sanlaap and Tomorrow's Foundation, schools, ward clubs, ward medical officers, parents and other community members as well as a range of systemic service providers proved integral to the success of this initiative.

“ Earlier, KMC was involved largely in matters related to water, electricity, drainage etc. Now it has expanded focus and wants to work on adolescent development. We started with Ward 26 and consider it as a model ward. We imparted trainings to adolescent boys and girls and are working in five more wards like this with organizations. Other Councillors have also shown interest. ”

**Indrani Saha Banerjee**

Member Mayor-In-Council (MMIC)  
Social Welfare and Urban Poverty Alleviation  
Kolkata Municipal Corporation





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# STRENGTHENING ADOLESCENT AGENCY

The initiative created awareness amongst adolescents, parents and teachers about eligibilities and benefits under **Kanyashree Prakalpa** and other schemes meant for adolescents. Kanyashree clubs at the school level along with mixed groups at the community level were the key adolescent platforms. They provided adolescent girls with opportunities for learning about adolescent health and nutrition, dangers of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy, prevention of abuse, self-expression, development, social action and the inculcation of life skills.

## BUILDING PLATFORMS FOR ADOLESCENT ENGAGEMENT

UNICEF's innovative toolkit, AdhaFull, comprising 26 short films on child rights, was used to promote five crucial life skills – self-awareness, effective communication, problem solving, decision making and interpersonal relationships. Life skills sessions were conducted in 29 government schools in the six wards to develop abilities in the girls to effectively deal with the demands and challenges of their lives. Similar sessions were undertaken with adolescent groups in the community wherein girls and boys (in and out of school) were included. Out of school adolescents were motivated by their peers for mainstreaming and delaying the age of marriage beyond 18 and 21 years. Inclusion of boys helped to facilitate the discussion and understanding for the need of conditional cash benefits for girls. It also initiated the process of reducing the discontent that boys harboured due to exclusion from such schemes.

Active in 16 government schools, the clubs typically have 20-30 girls who received Kanyashree benefits. The girls participated in focus group discussions, life skill sessions, film screenings, quizzes, rallies, street plays, football matches, art events and celebration of Kanyashree Day (14 August). They also interacted with duty-bearers and service providers who could be approached in cases of potential risks and incidents. For greater impact, meetings with parents and teachers and inter-generational dialogues between adolescents and parents were held.

“ Just as our daughters have become close friends, we too have grown close. The meetings help us share about our lives, challenges and issues facing our children. Since we are neighbours, the conversations don't stop at the meetings. We talk whenever we meet, whether it is while filling water or elsewhere. ”

Group of mothers, Ward 26, Kolkata

## Results and outcomes

**69** groups with **1,246** adolescents were created across the six wards, with Ward 26 emerging as a Model Ward. They were aware of their rights and mandated services and had begun to represent their peers in dialogues with key duty bearers.

**100** adolescents and youth (14 – 25 years) across five wards were involved in an aspirational mapping exercise by UNICEF partners to shape future skill building initiatives. **28** adolescents from Ward 26 alone presented their aspirations, issues and challenges before elected representatives.

In Ward 80, the Councillor also took measures to improve sanitation, waste management and street lighting, as well as a health mission for a highway and road repair.

In Ward 26, the Councillor proved consistent in his encouragement of various activities and services, providing full support to continue the work with neglected children, children on the streets, in red-light areas and slums.

Police complaint/s on an instance of child sexual abuse in Ward 26 could be successfully filed and the alleged perpetrator booked under Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 2012.

In Ward 86, the Councillor intervened to ensure that a specific location could be freed from the presence of men who often gathered there to drink.



## SKILL BUILDING AND PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

The Adolescent Friendly Wards initiative forged a connection with varied portfolios of the KMC, particularly the portfolios of Social Welfare and Urban Poverty Alleviation, sports, public parks and recreation to explore benefits for adolescents' health, girls' football team, enhance access to parks and development of gymnasiums within public

parks. There has also been a significant change in the mothers, they do not want their daughters to follow their footsteps and get married at an early age. They have found the courage to convince the male members of the family to enable their daughters to play football, continue with their education and not get married early.

## Results and outcomes

After crossing 18 years of age, **28** adolescents were linked to the skill building programme of Urban Poverty Alleviation and Social Welfare Department of Kolkata Municipal Corporation through the Councilor in Ward 26.

Currently **40** adolescent girls are playing football in an otherwise male dominated playground.

**Adolescents and youth closely associated with the initiative began to speak up within their families, peers and communities on the dangers of child marriage, various forms of gender-based violence including eve teasing and gendered restrictions on aspirations and mobility for girls. Parents and teachers understood the importance of educating and empowering girls. Mothers, in particular, applauded the life-chances their daughters got through the initiative to have a life better than their own. Along with their daughters, they too, took steps forward and up and became key allies for adolescents as well as the programme teams.**

# OVERCOMING FEAR, ENGAGING DUTY BEARERS, SEEKING ENTITLEMENTS

## REALISING THEIR RIGHT TO MANDATED SERVICES

The Adolescent Friendly Wards initiative encouraged adolescent girls and boys from deprived urban slum populations of the six wards to know more about the obligatory services from service providers mandated to work for their safety and wellbeing. It enabled them to place demands for their protection, health and space, and to seek improvements in their schools, neighbourhoods and wards. They were given exposure to administrators of schools, post offices, banks, legal services providers, police functionaries, and urban local governance functionaries.

## DRAWING RESPONSIVE ACTION FROM DUTY-BEARERS

In 24 schools, across all six wards, adolescents learnt about the governance of different portfolios like environment, food and sports, through a learning exercise of Child Cabinets. The adolescents were also exposed to legal literacy programmes under the Legal Literacy Club Programme on education, child marriage, child labour and protection from sexual violence through the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). Through visits to police stations and repeated interactions with police personnel, myths and fears in approaching them were dispelled. Girls and boys came to understand the concept of child friendly police stations and complaint registration while some girls also learnt self-defence under the Sukanya initiative.



“ We came to know about the Kanyashree scheme and all the related requirements. The money that we get when we turn 18 years should be used to help girls study further. It should not be seen as money that can now be spent on a girl's marriage. ”

Group of girls  
Santi Sangha School  
Ward 80, Kolkata

“ We told Councillor uncle about our problems. We said that we don't have proper water, toilets and drains here. The road needs to be repaired and there are problems with garbage also. He listened to us. Then, we saw some changes. The road was repaired. Garbage bins were placed. Work started on toilets. ”

Group of adolescent girls  
Ward 80, Kolkata

## LEADING DISCUSSION AND BECOMING AGENTS OF CHANGE

Significantly, the Adolescent Friendly Wards initiative facilitated interactions between adolescent girls and boys with the ward level child protection committee (WLCPC) members, Ward Councillors and other elected representatives. In Kolkata, where access to elected representatives and social security schemes is all too limited with big ward populations varying from 9,000 to 98,000, this initiative gave adolescents an opportunity to articulate their issues and concerns directly, report on ward conditions, and also understand local governance processes better. Some even participated in policy planning meetings on the youth agenda at the state level and at the national level in NITI Aayog. Soon, they became change agents and remarkably the overwhelming majority were girls.

Adolescents across the six wards participated in rallies and campaigns on key occasions like Children's Day, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child week, Kanyashree Day, etc., to address the importance of reducing drop outs among children and dangers and consequences of child

marriage. KMC went beyond its objectives of essential services of water, electricity, health and sanitation to address adolescent development. WLCPCs graduated to their mandated tasks of vulnerability analysis and bottom-up child protection planning as envisaged under ICPS with adolescent led mapping and situational analysis workshops held under the initiative.

“

We like coming together as the Kanyashree club and have good discussions on preventing child marriage. Even people who make arrangements in a marriage can be put in jail.

”

Group of girls  
Sri Bidya Niketan  
Ward 26, Kolkata

“

I didn't know how to take photos or that we should take multiple photos at one time. I also came to know about the different kind of lenses. I took one photo of a father and a son in a boat. The sun was just rising. It was a lovely photo. I want to travel and do wildlife photography.

”

**Ranajit Ghosh**  
Participant in photography workshop  
Ward 69, Kolkata



## Results and outcomes

**58** girls successfully rejoined school at the elementary level and 11 girls were supported to rejoin at the secondary level or access open schooling opportunities across five wards (38, 49, 69, 80, 86). **20** boys were supported to rejoin schooling at the elementary level and 17 boys at the secondary level.

**15** cases of child marriage were prevented across the six wards by adolescent groups of girls and boys. A ripple effect was created where the success in preventing one child marriage led to two subsequent successes.

Providing information to Childline 1098 and use of the helpline regarding child marriage increased (total **15** cases of child marriage have been reported till date).

In Ward 26, adolescent and youth engagement led to the WLCPC being involved in preventing **3** child marriages. Promoting the use of child tracking registers and installing drop boxes at the WLCPCs were discussed.

In Ward 80, the intervention led by adolescents and supported by the WLCPC, resulted in prevention of **4** child marriages in the ward.

**82** girls have been supported to access the benefits of the Kanyashree scheme (2017 to May 2019).

**WLCPC members across the six wards provided support for the programme activities. The programme teams engaged with Social Welfare and Urban Poverty Alleviation (KMC), and Department of Technical Education, Training and Skills Development to explore available schemes and opportunities that could be accessed by adolescents and youth.**

## SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS

The Adolescent Friendly Wards initiative by UNICEF in Kolkata, West Bengal between November 2016 and December 2019 provided adolescents with agency, resources, aspirations and motivation to set goals and seek a higher perspective, delay the age of marriage and ascend to achieve destinies other than marriage or economic and sexual exploitation. With each step up the ladder, they turned away from passivity, ignorance, victimhood, discrimination and exclusion, moving instead towards action, awareness, safety, mobility, opportunity, responsibility, independence, assertion, collaboration and decision-making. In short, they transitioned to being active agents, engaging and negotiating with their families, communities, the government and duty-bearers and demanding fulfilment of their rights.

**“ The Government of West Bengal has always been supportive towards any initiative benefitting children and adolescents. This convergent initiative between the line departments and Urban Local Bodies for developing Adolescent Friendly Wards was much required. ”**

**Dr. Shashi Panja**  
Hon'ble Minister of State  
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