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# The transformative power of sports

## Sport for development

Sports play a crucial role in the empowerment of adolescent girls, in breaking gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality. Sport is a powerful tool for involving all children – including the most marginalised and vulnerable – in group activities from an early age (UNHCR, 2013). According to the UNICEF report 'Getting into the Game', Sport for Development (S4D) is defined as the use of 'sport, or any form of physical activity, to provide both children and adults with the opportunity to achieve their full potential through initiatives that promote personal and social development'.

S4D therefore can be used as an inclusive means of helping children improve their health and develop leadership skills. Sports have had a significant impact on: continuation of higher schooling in girls; addressing issues such as eve teasing and stalking; helping overcome issues in the post-adolescence transition phase such as stress, anger, anxiety, affection, etc.; and in supporting decision-making abilities and building the ability to differentiate between the choices of right and wrong for self.

## The LAADO project

Encouraging girls and creating opportunities for them to showcase their calibre and excel in sports is a crucial aspect of the Leveraging and Advocating for Adolescents' Development Opportunities (LAADO) project<sup>1</sup>. It is an approach to strengthen adolescent empowerment through continued education, sports and physical training and exercises, which in turn are also instrumental in confidence building and teaching life skills such as negotiation and decision making.



The LAADO project uses S4D to empower adolescents, especially adolescent girls to provide an impetus to them to become agents of change for themselves, express themselves, make choices regarding their lives and protect themselves from violence, exploitation and harmful practices.

<sup>1</sup> The LAADO project is being implemented in select blocks of Tonk and Bikaner districts of Rajasthan in partnership between the district administration, UNICEF and the implementing NGOs – Pink City Cycle Rickshaw Chalak Sanstha (PCCRCS) in Tonk and Urmul in Bikaner and Jodhpur districts.

Adolescents who were part of Adolescent Girls' Groups (AGGs) were spurred as part of the programmatic intervention in Tonk and Bikaner districts to participate in sports. LAADO worked towards building a conducive environment in schools to encourage participation of girls in sports. As more girls started playing sports, it gained greater acceptance as a norm rather than an exception in the community.

The results have been most heartening. Girls not only play and have fun, but most importantly they occupy public spaces for playing sports instead of limiting themselves indoors. Some have also won laurels, making their families and communities proud. Girls have found a voice to express their desires and make themselves heard.

Stories of change

## Kabaddi brings glory to the school

Girls in the Senior Secondary School, Darda Hind gram panchayat in Tonk district have excelled in kabaddi and are winning tournaments at the district and state levels. With a little strengthening of the sports systems in the school, such as provision of essential equipment, participation of girls was ensured in sports and the results have started showing. The availability of sports amenities and the encouragement of teachers is now making girls come forward. Some teachers have even spent money from their own pocket to reward girls and to make their appreciation more visible and evident.

I love to play kabaddi. Chanting 'kabaddi, kabaddi', going to the other team's half and tagging members of the other team, excites me. Our teacher taught us to play kabaddi and we play the sport in school. We have been outside our panchayat twice to participate in kabaddi tournaments. I am a part of all the tournaments.

13-year-old Padma Gujar, Class 9  
Senior Secondary School  
Darda Hind gram panchayat, Tonk district





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Stories of change

## Veer Teja Sports Academy: Helping girls outshine boys in sports

When Ranjit Singh opened his sports academy in Palana village in Bikaner block of Bikaner district, only **13** girls joined the academy. Today there are **150** girls and **200** boys from nearby villages who come to train at Veer Teja Sports Academy. Though not a registered academy, it is a result of Ranjit Singh's sweat and toil, and his dream to see girls from his village excel in sports. Though he himself is a physical education teacher in another village located 35 kms away, Ranjit Singh makes it a point to train adolescents at his academy every evening without fail, be it the scorching heat of summers or the rainy season.

He visits homes in communities convincing parents to send their girls to play at the academy, along with making announcements at schools. The initial narrow-mindedness and doubtfulness among parents and community members has, to a large extent, given way to an openness to allow girls to participate in sports.

“Now my team in the under-17 category holds the third position and the team in the under-19 category holds the second position in handball. Eight girls have been selected at the state level. Every year, the number of girls is increasing at the academy. Some of the girls who get selected at the district or state levels come from very poor backgrounds and I always ask the selectors to judge them by their talent, ability and performance.”

Ranjit Singh, Veer Teja Sports Academy  
Palana village, Bikaner block, Bikaner district

Through his academy, Ranjit Singh has also given a strong message against casteism. Adolescents come from both private and government schools, from different backgrounds and he insists on not asking about the communities they belong to. Today, Ranjit Singh's name has become synonymous with trust and community members feel comfortable entrusting him with the responsibility of their daughters.

Stories of change

## She found her passion in sports

Fifteen-year-old Rukma Dudi had to face stiff opposition at home when she expressed her desire to be part of a sports team in her village, Palana. Not just her parents, but her brother too showed his displeasure at the thought of his sister participating

in sports. It took tremendous effort on the part of her coach Ranjit Singh to convince her brother and her parents that they would not regret their decision to send Rukma to the academy to learn handball. And, rightly so! She has done them proud by being a

part of the district-level team. Her brother now tells her that he feels proud when community members tell him that his sister is a good player.

The story of Rukma is all the more heartening because her parents got her married at the tender age of 11 years, but decided to send her to live with her husband only after she finished her studies. With her newfound passion in sports, Rukma has also found her sense of purpose. She wants to be a Physical Education teacher now and help other girls excel in the field of sports. Today, she is confident that her parents will allow her to fulfil her dream.

Padma and Rukma are not isolated cases of change. They are representative of a slowly but steadily

Earlier my brother was opposed to my participation in sports, but not anymore! I come to the academy whenever I want to. Now I am allowed to do the things I wished to. I will do well in sports and make sure that I take Ranjit sir's dream forward.

15-year-old Rukma Dudi  
Palana village, Bikaner district



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growing band of bright and talented adolescents who have grasped the opportunities presented to them and are leaving no stone unturned to evolve and realise their potential.

## Conclusion

The stories reflecting the change in these adolescent girls are reassuring and build hope in the hearts of scores of others who want to use sports as an expression of their creativity. The sports intervention has brought forth an effective approach to strengthening adolescent empowerment in the form of continued education, sports and physical training and exercises, building of confidence and other skills like negotiation and decision making among adolescents.

UNICEF's adolescent empowerment programming in Rajasthan focuses on increasing opportunities for education to reduce the vulnerability of girls and building their life skills to empower them with an enhanced ability to speak against early marriage and for child rights.

To this end, UNICEF is providing technical assistance to the Department of Women and Child Development, Department of Education and Department of Social Justice and Empowerment to build awareness, sensitisation and capacities among frontline workers and mobilise communities to make them active partners in planning and decision making. UNICEF is also strengthening the alliance of civil society organisations towards ending all forms of violence against children and women.

In its adolescent empowerment efforts, UNICEF has also actively worked for inclusion of child protection programming in schools of Rajasthan and for out-of-school children, with components such as strengthening of adolescent forums in and outside schools, self-defence trainings in schools and by giving an impetus to the enrolment of dropout girls in Open Schools. UNICEF's programming is facilitating access to various government schemes and programmes influencing children's education, among economically weaker sections, to ensure that entitlements reach all children and they can continue their education.

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