

MY OWN LEADER

EVALUATION OF
THE HUNGER PROJECT'S
ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PROGRAMME
IN BIHAR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



MANJIMA BHATTACHARJYA
APEKSHA VORA

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ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Between 2021 and 2024, The Hunger Project (THP) India implemented a multi-year programme focused on the empowerment of adolescent girls in four districts of Bihar—Jamui, Rohtas, Muzaffarpur and Arwal. Bihar ranks among the poorest Indian states on multiple indicators of gender and development: over 36% of the population lives below the poverty line, only 16.8% of women have completed ten years of schooling, and nearly 41% of young women aged 20–24 were married before the legal age of 18. Against this backdrop, the programme aimed to build girls' knowledge of their rights, strengthen their confidence and decision-making, and support their access to public services.

At the core of the programme was a life skills training curriculum delivered through Sukanya Clubs—40 adolescent girls' collectives that met bimonthly, facilitated by trained staff. Each club brought together around 35 girls from the most marginalised communities, providing a space for them to engage with information, peer learning, and skill-building. Over 1,400 girls participated in the programme, many of whom were either out of school, at risk of early marriage, or facing constraints in mobility and participation. Alongside, the programme provided close accompaniment from THP staff to support and empower the girls in returning to school, delay child marriages, increase access to health and entitlements, and build girls' capacities to act as informed citizens.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

An external evaluation led by feminist researchers Dr. Manjima Bhattacharjya and Apeksha Vora assessed the impact of four years of sustained engagement with adolescent girls, focusing on their agency and access to support. It reviewed the effectiveness of key strategies—trainings, workshops, and exposure visits—and examined their alignment with the organisation's mission, including synergies with work involving Elected Women Representatives (EWRs).

The evaluation adopted a mixed-methods, participatory approach that included surveys with over 600 girls, theatre-based workshops with 173 girls, and in-depth interviews with 28 key informants, including mothers, teachers, frontline workers, and EWRs across the four districts.

The 'expressions of power' framework (power within, power to, power with and power over) was useful as an analytical tool to assess impact of the programme as it helped us understand how it had helped build girls' power and status, while also acknowledging and reflecting the deep powerlessness shaping adolescent girls' lives.

FINDINGS

The adolescent girls' programme in Bihar has made significant wins across all four aspects of 'power' in girls' lives. The most overwhelming wins have been in the 'power within' category. Substantial gains were made in the 'power with' category, particularly on activating citizenship and entitlements, and the 'power to' category, linked to taking action and accessing resources. The most difficult was the

'power over' category, illustrating the overwhelming hold of social and gender norms on girls and women in society. Despite this, cases of resisting child marriages and responding to gender-based violence were reported by girls across all districts.

In the survey, girls reported learning the most on issues and laws related to child marriage, menstruation and reproductive health and their fundamental rights, through the programme. Almost all 600 girls surveyed reported that the programme had provided a space to find friends and allies, and support to fight against discrimination and violence. Girls overwhelmingly reported that the programme had helped them speak out, participate in collective action, and avail government entitlements and services.

The observations from the survey underlined what the workshops revealed. Girls shared that the experience had helped them move away from living in constant fear, feelings of worthlessness, and silence, and develop self-confidence and self-worth. The programme bridged girls to essential economic and health resources, enabling return to school, access to scholarships, vocational training, and income generation activities. It helped girls access healthcare services and government schemes, empowering them to advocate for themselves and their families.

IMPACT AREA 1: EMPOWERMENT AND SELF-WORTH

Through the 'Sukanya Clubs', safe spaces were created where girls felt seen, valued, and supported emotionally and materially. Girls demonstrated an improved ability to speak without fear and articulate personal experiences and feelings, and increased self-

awareness and confidence through understanding of rights, self, and bodily autonomy. A collective identity as 'Sukanya Club' girls was also formed that gave them strength.

IMPACT AREA 2 – EDUCATION AND RESOURCES

Girls were often asked, "What is the need to study?", as marriage and household work were seen as their destiny. They were discouraged to continue education beyond class 8. Returning to class 9 after dropping out was a major challenge in the field. The programme was able to shift this strong social norm, with an overwhelming majority of the adolescent girls in the programme (all drop-outs or not attending) returning to school.

Connection to economic resources such as scholarships and financial understanding of savings enhanced girls' bargaining power at home. Girls used scholarships, residential schools and other government entitlements to continue their education. Across all four districts, there were significant examples of girls' collective action and advocacy that led to improvements in school infrastructure (toilets, fans, teaching quality, provisions of a common room and so on).

IMPACT AREA 3 – ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

The programme led to increased awareness of reproductive health and menstruation amongst the girls, and the breaking of taboos and shame around menstruation. Using scientific reasoning, girls started questioning harmful superstitions around this.

Girls shared that the programme had helped provide them with the tools and vocabulary to process emotions and stress, leading to improved mental health. Through exposure visits to local health centers and information, girls' access to health services increased, with many of them reporting use of primary health care services to get vaccinations, supplements, pads, and insurance cards for themselves and their families.

Nutrition education led to the creation of kitchen gardens (poshanbadis) and unexpected gains of girls practicing better eating habits, as well as providing greens and nutritious vegetables for other family members. Along with increased self-love, girls pledged to never sleep hungry.

IMPACT AREA 4 – SHIFTING SOCIAL NORMS

Girls raised their voice to delay child marriages by calling helplines, using arguments from the law, and dialogue with parents and community along with support from peers. Girls began to identify violence, abuse, and discrimination at home and in public spaces, and acted against it.

For the first time, girls negotiated with families to leave the house and to attend residential workshops and exposure visits outside their village.

IMPACT AREA 5 – VOICE, CITIZENSHIP AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Girls found the voice to speak up at home, in school, and in public forums through increased self-confidence and training in improving negotiation skills.

Girls became resourceful and confident. They learnt to navigate bureaucratic systems and claim rights, and successfully accessed services (healthcare, pensions, school facilities) and led small community initiatives - as citizens. This was all the more significant given most of the girls were from socio-economic identity groups who were marginalized in society and were structurally excluded from accessing citizenship rights.

Girls took leadership roles in identifying problems and mobilizing collective action.

Girls found a strong sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and were equipped by information and exposure to schemes and processes. Through the programme, girls learned formal and informal ways to demand change—filing applications to improve schools, health centers, and water access, or to report harassment.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the deeply entrenched nature of social norms, gendered expectations, and stigma around girls' independence, large gains were made at individual level, and some glimmers of a collective voice emerged.

This success was a result of strategies tailored to and ground in local realities, with a commitment to inclusion, building trust with communities, intentional listening and long-

term engagement. Girls from the most marginalized backgrounds, at risk of early marriage or dropout, were prioritized.

The programme adapted to girls' needs—offering remedial classes, menstrual health training, and relevant interventions.

Engagement with key community leaders and families helped build support for girls' participation and the consistent support over four years fostered strong relationships, enabling sustained change and collective action.

Field staff, many with deep ties to the community or experience as EWRs, provided continuous mentorship. The approach was not one-size-fits-all—it was grounded in listening, evolving, and centering girls' needs. The Sukanya Clubs became not only learning spaces but social ecosystems that gave girls identity, belonging, and courage.

Despite these gains, challenges remain. The evaluation notes that social restrictions, gendered surveillance, and lack of family support remain significant challenges. Girls' expression of collective voice is still emerging. Wider community buy-in is slow. Families—particularly mothers—sometimes struggle with daughters' new-found aspirations. Girls are only beginning to connect personal struggles to systemic inequality.

To deepen the program's impact, in its next iteration the programme could consider:

- Expanding curriculum: Include themes like unpaid labour, caste, religion, financial literacy, and the Indian Constitution.
- Promoting critical thinking: Encourage girls to question entrenched social

norms and understand systemic injustice.

- Engaging families more strategically: Organise exhibitions or parent-daughter forums to foster dialogue.
- Strengthening public presence: Showcase girls' voices through performances, campaigns, or media.
- Leveraging peer and EWR networks: Foster regular interaction to build stronger support systems and collective identity.
- Focusing on post-programme sustainability: Develop alumni networks and continue supporting leadership development.

The programme demonstrated that with sustained support, participatory methods, and safe spaces for dialogue, girls from some of the most marginalised communities in Bihar can begin to articulate their rights, take informed decisions, and collectively negotiate for change.

In summary, the programme has transformed individual lives, built confidence, and opened up access to education, health, and citizenship for girls from structurally excluded communities. By building on its strengths and scaling its interventions, the programme holds potential to seed broader social transformation and enable a generation of girls to shape their own futures.

At A Glance: Key Impact Areas

1. Empowerment and Self-Worth

- Girls found emotional support and safe spaces through Sukanya Clubs.
- Developed new identities as citizens, students, and individuals.
- Reported increased confidence, awareness of rights, and ability to speak without fear.

2. Education and Resources

- High school re-enrolment rates: the majority of girls including dropouts returned to school; some entered college—first in their families.
- Girls accessed scholarships, school facilities, and influenced improvements in school infrastructure.
- Gained financial literacy and greater bargaining power at home.

3. Health and Wellbeing

- Greater awareness of menstruation and reproductive health.
- Reduced stigma and adoption of scientific reasoning on health.
- Improved access to tetanus shots, supplements, Ayushman cards, and nutrition practices.

4. Shifting Social Norms

- Girls delayed or resisted child marriage using legal tools and community dialogue.
- Challenged violence and negotiated freedom of movement.
- Took initiative in accessing government services and leading community change.

5. Voice, Citizenship and Collective Action

- Girls spoke up at home, school, and public forums.
- Took leadership roles and began understanding citizenship.
- Used collective platforms to demand school improvements, report harassment, and protect peers.