

# LEARNING AGAINST ALL ODDS: IN STUBBORN PURSUIT OF EDUCATION



# Intersecting Identities, Spaces and Realities

Adolescent girls are not a single, homogeneous group. Their lives are shaped by intersecting identities, social locations, and lived realities. Any meaningful engagement with regard to their visibility, concerns, and needs must therefore acknowledge this complexity. Girls have been systematically marginalised, and for Dalit girls, the questions of access to education, health, nutrition, safety, identity, and freedom are not abstract concerns but urgent, everyday struggles.

**How, then, do we as a society create and nurture spaces that truly support them as they navigate the compounded burdens of gender and caste discrimination?**

Through the programme with adolescent girls in rural villages, we are creating safe, enabling spaces, such as **Sukanya Clubs** in Bihar or **Kishori Samuhs** in Karnataka. Strengthening and expanding such spaces is crucial to ensure they are active participants - claiming their rights, shaping their futures, and pushing for a more just and inclusive society.

As we mark **Dalit History Month**, we celebrate and sustain the leadership, resilience, and potential of Dalit girls.

# हिंसा

रुको

मिशन शक्ति

भी हूँ समूची आकारा की है मुझे लारा

बच्चों को पढ़ाने की लगे गह बंद करो ये बाल विवाह

सुरक्षित रहे बेटियाँ

मिशन शक्ति नारी सुरक्षा नारी सम्मान नारी स्वावलम्बन

जिस देश में होता है नारी का सम्मान देगा होता है सम्मान

हेल्पलाइन न.

- 90 → वूमैन पावर लाइन
- 98 → चोइल हेल्पलाइन
- 92 → एकीकृत हेल्पलाइन
- महिला हेल्पलाइन

बेटी बचाओ बचाव

# गुड टच और बैड टच

होठ गदन दाती प्राइवेट प हिप्स

गुड टच



# Education and the Question of Value

How are boys and girls socialised into education? Whose education holds value? Whose schooling is seen as an investment, and who can be treated as expendable? For Dalit (and Adivasi) girls, this is inflamed by caste-based discrimination. Caste remains an implacable barrier in certain pockets; accessing spaces and services is not easy for Dalit communities. Within schools, this can translate into exclusion, neglect, and unequal treatment, compounding their marginalisation.

Yet they learn to unlearn, hold on, assert their voices, and make decisions about various aspects of their lives. It is in a **stubborn hope for a better future** that Anisha, Lalita, Chandani, Gunja, and many other girls from the Dalit community continue to show up, find ways to push back against entrenched hierarchies, and are driven by the possibility of a future beyond imposed limitations.

The sense of being “seen” and “heard” in the meetings is helping them **“claim more agency in our lives,”** shared Lalita. This paves the way for how they articulate concerns about issues beyond education.

What might seem small from the outside is a massive turning point for many. It holds the promise that could potentially reshape their life.

Echoing Bama, who articulated the significance of education in **“empowering us to throw away everyday indignities”**, these girls are reclaiming small corners of dignity in incremental but powerful ways. Through knowledge, dialogue, and solidarity, they challenge the status quo and move forward with confidence.

The meetings have become a safe space, an entry point, where access to knowledge and other resources matter, enabling them to confront important questions with a new language. A deeper understanding of their right to education has led to a vital shift in their confidence, the way they use their voice, and, in turn, broadened their aspirations for the future.



Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil Dalit writer. Her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu.



# Navigating Unequal Classrooms

13-year-old **Lalita Kumari** from Jamui District, Bihar, belongs to the Musahar community, an extremely marginalised Scheduled Caste group that is often excluded from mainstream development. She has experienced discrimination firsthand. At school, some students forced her to sit on the back bench, making her feel unwelcome. Over time, she lost interest in studies and stopped attending school regularly. Her father, a migrant labourer, and her mother, who earns a living as a bidi worker and has been facing financial pressure, also wanted Lalita to stay at home and contribute to the family income.

In February 2025, curious yet hesitant, Lalita joined the Sukanya Club with other adolescent girls. Initially, her past school experiences made her reluctant to attend meetings. However, after a few sessions, she realised that this girls' collective was a very different space - **"it felt safe, one where no girl was teased, everyone was respected, and the didis encouraged each participant with appreciation."**

As Lalita began actively participating in life skills training, she gradually gained self-assurance. She shared that she had started to recognise **"my own strengths and felt just as capable"** and beautiful as other girls. With renewed confidence, Lalita re-enrolled in Class 5 and is now making efforts to attend school regularly.

For **Gunjan**, 16, caste discrimination inside the school also acted as a constraint more than the physical access to school. She shared how, during mid-day meal (a government scheme that provides free, nutritious meals to children in primary and upper primary schools and an incentive to increase school attendance/enrollment and address malnutrition), one of the teachers discriminated against her and other children from Dalit households. They were made to sit in a separate corner and served meals at the end.

This forced a few to drop out. She also contemplated discontinuing, but continued engagement in the leadership and life-skills workshops gave her the confidence and language to persist. Her determination and support from the other girls enabled her to directly call out the teacher and complain to the principal, who took swift action. "He now treats us with respect," she conveyed, restoring a sense of dignity.

**Chandani Kumari**, who is 15, also grappled with unequal classrooms in her pursuit of education. Her father works as a ragpicker and her mother as a daily wage labourer, making it difficult for the family to meet basic needs. Like many girls in her community, Chandani shoulders significant household responsibilities and often accompanies her mother to work. In her village in Muzzafarpur district, Bihar, education is not seen as a priority, particularly for girls, and access is even more difficult for those belonging to Dalit communities.



Chandani had dropped out of school after Class 8, a transition marked not by achievement but by systemic neglect. She recalls a comment insinuating that students like her were “benefited in the name of caste,” reflecting a dismissive and discriminatory attitude.

Her association with the Sukanya Club, the exposure it provided, and consistent conversations became an important catalyst for change. Chandani began to articulate her desire to continue her education. Despite resistance from her parents - shaped by poverty and fear of backlash because of entrenched caste biases - she was eventually able to re-enrol in Class 9.

Chandani’s journey in school, nevertheless, continues to be marked by caste-based discrimination, especially within the classroom, which affects her sense of belonging and participation. She shares that girls from the “Chamar Tola” are made to sit at the back, while others occupy the front rows.

Chandani, Lalita and Gunjan’s experiences highlight how caste discrimination intersects with gender and economic pressure to limit access to education for Dalit girls. It is not just about enrollment, but about dignity, inclusion, and equal opportunity within the school system. Today, although Chandani attends school only two to three days a week, her resolve to continue reflects her strength and desire for more than she is allowed to have.



# Leveraging Institutional Mechanisms

Anisha Kumari's journey evolves from self-awareness to leveraging existing tools and spaces to hold authorities responsible. A 14-year-old from the Mushahar community, she had dropped out of school midway in Class 7, burdened with caregiving responsibilities.

Sukanya Club became an important access point - a safe and encouraging space where Anisha felt included. She learned about communication, her rights, and the importance of education. She initiated conversations at home, advocating for a more balanced division of responsibilities. Slowly, her family began to respond. Her father started sharing caregiving duties, and Anisha re-enrolled in school with renewed determination.

However, her return to school still left her vulnerable to caste-based discrimination within the classroom. As a girl from the Mushahar community, Anisha faced "exclusion from my peers, who mocked my appearance and identity." When she approached the school authorities, her concerns were dismissed, reinforcing a culture of silence and denial around caste discrimination.

On the verge of dropping out again, she drew strength from the Sukanya Club. She and her peers chose to collectively

address the issue. With support from THP, they decided to raise the matter in the School Management Committee (SMC) - a formal platform meant to ensure accountability in schools.

Her courage shifted the conversation, leading to formal acknowledgement and corrective action by the school. The school was compelled to publicly address students, reinforcing that any identity-based discrimination would not be tolerated.

Anisha resumes her education. She carries not just her books, but also a growing sense of agency.

**Kavita**, like the majority of girls in rural areas, experienced immense pressure to undertake household chores or work outside to support the family income. "I was often unable to finish schoolwork because of added housework." As a result, she would be punished harshly at school by the teacher.

"Once, I was badly chided, and caste names were hurled at me because I am a Dalit. The teacher would say things like, 'You and girls from your caste don't need to be educated, you will get married anyway. You are unnecessarily crowding the classroom.'"

Kavita felt hurt and disrespected. She decided not to go to school. Later, Kavita and her parents raised the matter in the SMC meeting. The SMC president made a written complaint to the Block Education Officer against the teacher. The escalation forced the teacher to accept his mistake, and he vowed not to repeat it.

For now, Kavita and other girls from Dalit households continue to attend school without any fear or hesitation.

Similarly, in Karnataka, **Aishwarya**, a 16-year-old from Bidar district, recognised her voice and what began as hesitant participation soon translated into confidence and action. Quiet but perceptive, she dreamed of becoming a teacher. Joining adolescent girls' leadership meetings and Kishori Samuhs, she became more aware of the existing caste-based prejudice encountered by her and other students from marginalised communities.

"We were made to eat separately, bringing our own plates." Refusing to stay silent, she raised the issue in school forums. Though initially dismissed, she ensured their voices were heard, and "I thought to escalate the issue through the Child Rights Protection Committee. School authorities intervened, discriminatory practices were stopped, and equal access to meals was ensured for all of us."

Aishwarya's grit continued to grow. Her leadership extended further when she raised concerns about the lack of girls' toilets at a Children's Grama Sabha - highlighting the link between infrastructure, dropout rates, and child marriage. Her voice contributed to further action at the district level.



# Learning Solidarity: Conversations Break Barriers

The impact of these spaces is not limited to individual transformation - it also reshapes social relationships.

**Durga Kumari**, now 22 years old, reflects on how her participation in adolescent programmes helped her confront caste and religious discrimination within her own family.

**“The girls’ club created a safe and empowering space where I could understand these issues, embrace differences, grow in confidence, and express myself freely.”**

Disturbed by the exclusion faced by her friends, Neha and Ajmari, who were not allowed to enter her home due to rigid notions of caste purity and religious difference, she initiated patient and sustained conversations within her family. Despite initial resistance, Durga persisted, sharing what she had learned. Over time, her mother and later her grandmother also began to question long-held beliefs.

Today, Durga runs a tailoring centre in Rohtas district, training girls from diverse backgrounds, combining economic empowerment with social change.



# Beyond Access: Towards Dignity and Agency

These stories, especially in the context of Dalit History Month, underscore the importance of creating safe, inclusive spaces for adolescent girls. For many Dalit girls, education is not just about enrollment - it is about dignity, belonging, and equal opportunity.

Their journeys reveal that while structural barriers remain deeply entrenched, they are not insurmountable. It also confirms that **responsive institutional mechanisms** and timely corrective actions from authorities can pave the way for safety, inclusion and equality. Justice delayed is justice denied!

Within these spaces, girls are not passive recipients - they are active agents, learning to question, negotiate, and challenge the power structures that have historically excluded them. By engaging with formal institutions and informal collective platforms, they are ensuring that their presence is visible, their voices are heard, and their rights are not diminished or erased, but firmly claimed and protected.

