SUKANYA CLUB

RESOLVE TO REWRITE FUTURES: ONE MEETING AT A TIME

THE HUNGER PROJECT INDIA



When it comes to recognising and realising girls' rights, one must take cognizance of the crucial fact that it's not a "single-issue struggle." The question of access to education, health, nutrition, identity, safety, and freedom, rights that are often violated, indicates a multifaceted battle on several fronts. Girls are asserting their voices to make decisions about various aspects of their lives and to access rights, entitlements, and panchayat services.

Neeta (17) aspires to carve out a dignified livelihood for herself. However, she has had to grapple with her family's poor economic situation. "I have had to support my parents by working on other people's farms. This affected my school attendance. Moreover, it tired me out a lot." Despite these challenges, Neeta was determined not to drop out. She took the initiative to discuss her situation in a Sukanya Club (girls' collectives in Bihar) meeting. The club, a crucial support system, suggested that she could learn tailoring to earn a decent income without physical strain. "I discussed it with my parents and immediately reached out to an older woman who could teach me basic cutting and stitching. Unable to pay fees, I offered to tutor her children in exchange." Neeta recently completed her schooling and now earns INR 1000/month (USD 12). Her story is a testament to resilience, determination, and the vital role of safe spaces like the Sukanya Club.

On the other hand, Zainab, Reema, Jamuna, Simran, and Mehreen, all members of a Sukanya Club in Muzaffarpur district, demonstrated the power of collective action and active citizenship. They noticed the lack of solar streetlights in areas that needed them the most and decided to address this pressing community issue. With the support of the Didi (field mobiliser), they approached the elected woman representative of their gram panchayat. Together, they drafted a petition and submitted it to the council secretary. Their efforts, facilitated by the Sukanya Club, was instrumental in installing three additional streetlights within a month, significantly improving the safety and mobility of their community. This story is a powerful testament to the role of collectivising in empowering girls and positively changing communities. It underscores the transformative power it embodies, leaving a lasting impact on the community.

This has become possible and sustainable given how The Hunger Project India's adolescent girls' programme in Bihar has been shaped over the years. Now in its eighth year, the momentum of the interventions and the rigour of the approach has evolved in myriad directions through girls' leadership workshops, life-skills education, and need-based interventions (thematic issues like violence against women, access to justice, which require deeper engagement). These combine elements of girl-centric leadership programming that promotes an empowered self with an intentional focus on making local governance institutions responsive to girls' needs and rights.

The essay builds on elaborate examples of leadership and active citizenship manifested in girls' individual and collective actions in Bihar. Voice and agency come together to negotiate with family members and/or demand effective government services. An empowered sense of self emerges entwined with the expansion of consciousness, thus creating vital shifts in girls' confidence, broadening aspirations, and taking action for themselves and others.







From Left: Dimple, Zainab, Mehreen, Khushi

WE WANT EDUCATION

Accessing basic opportunities and services (education, health, livelihood) is still an uphill struggle for many girls in rural areas.

In the Santhal region of Jamui, four members of the Sukanya club shared how they have been renting a small room in Jhajha block to finish grades 9-10, as there is no high school in the panchayat. “We argued, communicated, and expressed our desire to complete our education. If we have an education, we can see and experience the world differently from our parents," shared Meena. Phoolwari added, “It was a costly affair, taking care of rent, food, and coaching class. It wasn't an easy conversation to have with our parents. But being part of the Sukanya club gave us the confidence to articulate our aspirations.”

In the Rajlakala panchayat, caste discrimination inside the school was more of a deterrent than physical access to school. Girls 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. Similarly, they were asked to sit on the back benches in the classroom. This forced many to drop out. Gunjan (15), a feisty, determined youth, and the other girls directly called him out and complained to the principal. “He now behaves better and treats us with respect.”

One of the most noteworthy impacts of the adolescent girls’ programme has been that in 2021, when the new batch commenced, many girls on the verge of dropping out of school due to COVID-19 shutdowns were re-enrolled. “If The Hunger Project did not mobilise us for the programme, many of us may not have continued school,” shared Anita (16) from Pirpa panchayat. A sentiment echoed across all four districts. Access to education remains a quintessential gateway to a better future and to breaking the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Accessing education also implies improving the education infrastructure and facilities. Sukanya Club members of Bariya panchayat passionately spoke about how they had complained to the authorities about one of the mid-day meal cooks who was stealing food from the stock meant for the students.

“We observed some irregularities as we were not served enough food. The quantity was lower than usual. We reported the issue during a School Management Committee (an important unit of monitoring and governance of school-related functioning) meeting. The President looked into the matter and took action.” The committee decided not to fire her but changed the terms of her job. She is now responsible for cleaning the kitchen.





"But being part of the Sukanya club gave us the confidence to articulate our aspirations."
Top to Bottom: Sukanya club members of Chappa and Rajlakala panchayat, respectively.

WE WANT HEALTHY FUTURES

Similarly, girls began to strongly acknowledge that they are more at risk of poor nutrition, which, in turn, adversely affects their health and limits their education and other opportunities. They began to understand the significance of improved nutrition and a robust need for food-secure futures, which saw girls take it upon themselves to grow kitchen gardens as one way to address their nutritional needs. Simultaneously, they worked on linking their families and others in the community to ration shops (under the public distribution scheme (PDS)).

A total of 333 nutrition gardens by girls across 40-gram panchayats. “We learned about it during a Sukanya club meeting, which made me curious. It is a fun, creative task but also requires serious thinking around what fruits and vegetables we should grow,” said Himani and Muskan. It is also an opportunity for many to rethink their food habits. Misha shared, “Growing our kitchen garden has also helped us as a family. My sister-in-law was pregnant and regularly had access to green vegetables from our garden.” An important impact of this intervention has been the growth of their decision-making powers in the household as the girls take responsibility for the kitchen garden. They feel proud and appreciated by the family!

Speaking of food security, Jyoti and Neelam of Biparsi panchayat mobilised other Sukanya Club members to remedy the leakages in the PDS system at a local ration shop. It is another fervent story for adolescent girls who recognised their agency and stepped up as active citizens in local governance. They questioned the PDS dealer’s corrupt practices and demanded that the correct amount of rice and lentils be given to everybody who fell under the priority household category. “We threatened him with a formal complaint if he did not mend his ways.” As a result of their efforts, 35 families now receive timely rations in appropriate quantities as they are entitled to.





Left: Malti tends to her kitchen garden; Right: Jayanti mobilised Sukanya Club members to fight the corrupt PDS dealer. 35 families now receive timely rations in appropriate quantities as they are entitled to.

WE WANT ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Regarding livelihood opportunities, girls resist cheaper, hazardous, labour-intensive occupations like beedi (hand-rolled cigarettes) and broom-making.

"We refuse to make beedis," said the girls in the Chai panchayat. "It affects health and posture, and it's tiring. We have seen how it has made our mothers and grandmothers sick, causing breathing problems. They can't change their ways; they have been doing this forever. But we hope to do things differently." Beedi making is an occupation in Bihar undertaken mostly by women of Scheduled Caste households. For 500 beedis, they earn a measly INR 50 (USD 0.60). "There is no leisure, only body aches... Babasaheb has taught us to value our lives. We will try to make a different pehchan (identity)."

Mansi (15), a Santhali girl, attended a tailoring course at a skill centre in the block to earn income. "I also received a certificate at the end of the course. Of the INR 150-200 (USD 2) I earn daily, I save half in the bank and give the rest to my mother for household needs." One of the reasons she decided to learn this skill was that she loved designing clothes and wanted to explore that path. At the same time, she shared that she didn't want to partake in broom-making. "It is time-consuming, exhausting, back-breaking work."

The impact is evident. Girls' increased confidence in saying "no" to older ways of doing things and making somewhat bolder and more informed decisions about their futures paves the way for alternative opportunities.



Left: Sukanya Club members from Chai panchayat stand firm on their decision not to engage in beedi-making. Centre: A woman rolls beedis, sitting on her front porch. Right: Mansi opts for tailoring instead of engaging in the broom-making work her family does.

WE WANT SOCIAL SECURITY

It is no small feat to see adolescent girls across Rohtas, Jamui, Muzaffarpur, and Arwal districts in Bihar facilitating linkages with several social security schemes for the elders in their families and communities.

Whether it is relief in the form of old age pensions for their grandparents, pensions for persons with disabilities for their siblings, helping a woman in their village with her application for a widow pension, or opening a bank account for their mother, these girls are building their knowledge and understanding the panchayat services.

Having access to social protection remains a critical issue for many rural households. When asked why they think accessing social welfare schemes is important, girls mentioned it can help ensure some income security against poverty, especially during difficult times like a pandemic, which has had a dire impact on families and girls' education and mental health.

For instance, Lata explained, "The family benefit scheme is for those families where an earning member has died. The Bihar government supports such families with a one-time amount of INR 20,000 (USD 238). My family received it. This helped to allay the immediate risk of hunger in my family."





Sukanya Club - a safe space enabling individual and collective voice, confidence, mobility (physical and social), active citizenship and empowerment.



SMASHING PATRIARCHY, SEEKING EQUALITY, BUILDING COLLECTIVE WAYS OF SEEING BETTER FUTURES

The Hunger Project India's conscious interventions continuously endeavour to address the existing gaps and take creative but substantive approaches to enhancing their skills and capabilities. Girls display confidence, pride, and ownership in communicating and engaging with the world, inside and outside, one meeting at a time.

The various acts of leadership in their communities (delaying marriage, improving school infrastructure, access to healthcare, safe mobility, questioning gender and caste discrimination), including engagement with different panchayat actors (elected women, interface with government officials, service providers), are a testament to the pivotal change that has been and is possible when we create safe spaces of learning that allow us to co-create alternative pathways than those imagined for them. Through spaces like the Sukanya Club - a safe space enabling individual and collective voice, confidence, mobility (physical and social), action and empowerment - they are afforded to think and rethink the educational and economic opportunities that, in turn, empower them to cope with and challenge patriarchal structures, realise aspirations beyond early marriage, and, in many ways, advocate for change in society.

Each experience of girls raising their voice for their rights is a hard bargain and an attempt to enhance their life choices, given the harsh reality of their circumstances and structures surrounding them. Each Sukanya Club action involves a process enabling them to construct and cement a unique collective identity and claim some power over their decisions.

We invest in adolescent girls because they are equal rights-holders (not merely economic assets or a means to achieving development goals) and have the fundamental right to a life with dignity and safety as equal citizens.

As a result, we witness a critical process of knowledge-building and consciousness-raising, enabling girls to emerge as individuals in their own right, as citizens, and be role models for each other, building friendships and solidarities, and dreaming better futures. As Mahasweta Devi (a fiery, celebrated Indian literary figure) writes of the most marginalised and vulnerable, "Why shouldn't they be allowed to dream? The right to dream should be the first fundamental right. The right to dream."

Vanda (17) proudly shared, "Haq mangana seekha hai! Apni awaaz ki takat samjhi hai! Samuh ki takat samjhi hai! (We have learned to demand our rights, recognise my voice's power, and understand the power of forming a collective)."

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