



Passage to Change



The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has worked through decades towards 'delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every child birth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled'. Aligned with the post-2015 development agenda and the global framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, UNFPA's efforts focus on four key tracks in India • Investing in adolescents and youth especially the vulnerable and the marginalized • Expanding the availability and use of integrated sexual and reproductive health information and services with a focus on family planning • Ending the practice of gender-biased sex selection and promoting gender equity and equality; and • Using data to decode population dynamics including evidence-based advocacy to address the emerging issue of population ageing.

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# Passage to Change

*A photo essay on the Action for Adolescent Girls (AAG) initiative*



# Foreword

Despite improvements on several key development indicators, there are still issues which limit adolescents in India from achieving their full potential. Around 14% of girls and 9% of boys aged 15-19 years are illiterate, and only 27% of girls have completed 10 or more years of school. In rural areas, gender disparity in education increases sharply with age. By the time they reach high school, many girls begin to drop out. While 77% girls aged 6-10 attend school, 67% girls aged 15-17 remain in school.

Facts like these make it imperative to invest in girls, especially if we need to attain Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In 12 countries around the world, the Action for Adolescent Girls (AAG) initiative is helping develop scalable models for empowering adolescent girls, by building social, health and economic assets for them. UNFPA is providing technical assistance for this global initiative, with joint funding by the United Nations Foundation.

In India, AAG is being implemented in Udaipur district of Rajasthan. This hilly desert district has 50% tribal and 80% rural population. Around 47% population of the district has been categorised as living below poverty line.

Steering the movement for empowerment in the field are UNFPA's two implementing partners, Vishakha and Jatan. While Vishakha covers 362 *Anganwadi* Centres (government-sponsored child-care and mother-care centre) in Salumber block, Jatan has 249 Centres under its purview in Kherwara block.

With valuable support from the Department of Women and Child Development, the two partners are doing a commendable job in slowly and steadily transforming the lives of thousands of adolescent girls in far-flung villages. Working in these areas is not easy, as there are many geographical and cultural barriers to overcome. But, as the old saying goes: When there is a will, there is a way.



Frederika Meijer

UNFPA Representative, India and Bhutan



## *Why tribal Udaipur*

The city of Udaipur is known for its palaces and lakes. But in many of the outlying tribal villages, the picture of prosperity is strikingly different. In these villages, social pressures compel women and girls to live a life of meek submission, and they are very often married off before the age of 18. Here, countless adolescent girls have either never gone to school or dropped out of one. Reasons like these make AAG provide the much-needed passage to social and economic transformation.







## A whirlwind of chores

Sugna quietly accepted her life. Girls her age, she believed, were born to toil from dawn to dusk. Her mother had done that, and so had her grandmother. In these tribal areas of Udaipur, adolescent girls have a million chores to do: gather firewood, fetch water, help cook food, graze the lone goat or cow their family may possess... At the end of the day, there is no time left for anything else, except to go to sleep exhausted and wake up next day only to repeat those chores all over again.





## The agony of growing up

Badri is lucky. 6 km from her village is a tiny pond that has rain water for around 4 months a year. But squeezing time out for the long walk to the pond is never easy.

Most of the time, she has no option but to bathe at the community hand pump or well, with the world staring. Even open defecation is a daily routine. With no toilets, and homes that are all of one room for the entire family, life is not easy for girls, especially after they reach adolescence.





## Motherhood in childhood

*Nata pratha* (deserting wife to buy a new one) and *atta-satta* (barter marriage) may not be rampant any more, but these practices still exist. In villages where a large section of opinion leaders staunchly support social restrictions on girls' education and mobility, and accept child marriages as a norm, it needs a concerted effort of all age groups to usher in an era of gender equality. The initial response to AAG shows that, with perseverance, this is indeed doable.



## *Setting the stage*

Before reaching out to adolescent girls, the project implementing partners set out to earn the trust of local gatekeepers. The task on hand was enormous. Parents were being expected to liberate their daughters from the four walls of their homes. Village seniors were being asked to allow young girls to roam freely. Adolescent girls were being motivated to question age-old norms. However, when efforts for social betterment are honest and persistent, positive change is bound to follow.







### And then, he nodded

Rama Meena was no different from other elders in his village. He was a strong believer in keeping his daughters in law and granddaughters indoors, as this was his way of keeping them 'safe and straight'.

The local *Anganwadi* worker kept chipping this deep resistance one bit at a time. Now, when you speak with Rama, he is bubbling with stories of how his grandchild is playing a remarkable role in convincing other adolescent girls to join the local *Kishori* Club (adolescent girls' club).





## Tapping sibling power

One of the most convincing advocates for social change are young men and boys speaking on behalf of their sisters and other young girls in the neighbourhood. The strategy of drawing male siblings into key discussions is proving extremely beneficial, as these young advocates take the gender debate to their families back home.





### Where passion goes a long way

Ritu Devi is the *Anganwadi* worker of Lapda village. However, she travels far beyond the limits of her village to invite adolescent girls from neighbouring villages – some of which are located over 60 km away. For this, she travels long distances and, much of the way, on her own two feet. Like her, over 600 more *Anganwadi* workers have volunteered to find time to turn the project into a community movement. This testifies that the future of the young girls here is sure to be a whole lot brighter.



## *The churn has begun*

Changes are already visible. Every 15 days, at designated *Anganwadi* Centres, groups of adolescent girls meet to discuss matters related to social, health and financial empowerment. Leading this are peer educators called *Sakhi-Sabelis*. From amongst these peer educators, in turn, emerge Cluster Coordinators who help increase the footprint of the movement. Already, there are 1,833 *Sakhi-Sabelis*, and 61 Cluster Coordinators, working across 611 *Anganwadi* Centres and over 1000 hamlets.







### Destination: Kishori Club

There are thousands of hamlets, but only 611 *Kishori* Clubs for them to meet. However, this doesn't stop the adolescent girls from participating in the Club activities. For this, they cross rivers, travel in crammed jeeps, walk long tracts, and some even ride their own scooters, to reach the venue. Who would believe that these are the very same girls who, till some time back, were not allowed to step out of their homes!





### Learning was never as much fun

The games, discussions, training and other activities that the Cluster Coordinators and *Anganwadi* workers facilitate attract girls from villages and hamlets far and near. The curriculum developed jointly by UNFPA and the two implementing partners, with rich inputs from international and national consultants, makes these interactions all the more meaningful and engaging. Often girls even younger than 10 insist on joining the meetings, and won't take “no” for an answer!





### Popular topic of discussion

News about the meetings and *Kishori* Clubs is spreading fast. Existing member constantly motivate more friends to join. Cluster Coordinators help convince parents by regularly talking to family members. Believe it or not, mothers have actually started pushing their daughters to take time out to join the local club. With so much positivity being generated, even those who are still not convinced to be part of this initiative are finding reasons to sit up and take notice.



## *Champions of change*

The AAG initiative has a unique ripple effect, with adolescent girls who are a part of the initiative, in turn, touching the lives of many others in the community.

Everywhere, in many different ways, deep-rooted gender stereotypes are being challenged with resolve, courage and conviction. Indeed, in the desert district of Udaipur, a movement for empowerment is ablaze. And '*aag*' is an apt name for it, for in the local language the word means 'fire'.







## Tale of two villages

The neighbouring villages of Balicha and Kheraghathi have been arch-enemies, after a villager from Balicha was killed in Kheraghathi. No one from one village was ever allowed to step into the other. When a *Kishori* Club was set up in Balicha, 2 adolescent girls called Sheela and Jaimeena decided to erase the boundary between the villages. They convinced the village heads to give adolescent girls like them special permission to attend club meetings across 'enemy lines'. Thus, a giant step was taken to bring the two communities closer!





### Mani's story

Her father works in the field and brother has migrated to a distant city. Her mother is unwell. So, Mani virtually takes care of her home single-handed. With the *Anganwadi* Centre a distance away, and situated across the river, it took a while to convince her parents to allow Mani to join the *Kishori* Club. But now that she has joined the Club, she always finds a way to attend every single meeting, without compromising on her work at home. A true time manager, isn't she?





### **Kesar's story**

After attending a couple of meetings at the *Kishori* Club, Kesar was convinced that she is in no way inferior to the boys in her village. To everyone's amazement, Kesar started zooming around on a scooter. In a village where many adolescent girls are not even allowed to step out of their homes, this was indeed a strong statement on gender equality. Now, Kesar's circle of friends is growing rapidly. The main reason: On every meeting day, one lucky girl gets to ride the wind with her!





### **Manju's story**

Married off before 18, Manju got to know at the *Kishori* Club about the legal age of marriage. She promptly returned home, and insisted on completing her education. Initially, there was opposition from both sides of her family, but finally her decision prevailed. Having passed her tenth grade, she now intends finishing schooling and even finding a job before going back to her in-laws. Best of all, her husband and in-laws are proud and supportive of her aspirations.







### Versha's story

She dropped out of school after the tenth standard. The Cluster Coordinator at the *Kishori* Club convinced her to rethink, telling her that education is a must to stand on one's own two feet. So, Versha decided to do both at one go. She has re-joined school and is studying hard. And, in her spare time, she also began earning money by stitching clothes. While working on her sewing machine, she catches up with other club members to plan the next meeting. Talk about multi-tasking!





### Kalyani's story

Not long ago, Kalyani joined as a member of the *Kishori* Club in her village. Noticing her ability to motivate her friends and lead discussions, she was soon made a *Sakhi-Sabeli* (Peer Educator) and then promoted to be a Cluster Coordinator. The manner in which she handles sessions at the Club, it seems she has been a professional trainer for years. No wonder, she has become a role model for so many girls in her own village, as well as in others around.





### Shanti's story

While technically the *Kisbori* Club is in Shanti's village, she needs to walk 10 km each way - through the jungle, across hillocks, and past several hamlets to reach the Club. She doesn't mind the distance one bit, as she draws energy from the discussions and games at every meeting. In fact, she has turned the long walks into an advantage, as she often stops by on the way to meet other adolescent girls and convinces them to join the Club.



*Gboomar* is a tribal dance for big festivals and ceremonies. The adolescent girls choosing to perform this dance at the *Kishori* Club speaks volumes about how important these meetings have become for them.



# Action *for* Adolescent Girls

*Technical &  
Financial Support* ▶



*Project  
Implementation* ▶

