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July 05, 2013

Abhi Aur Safar Baaki Hai

By Kalpana Khare

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(This is the fourth of a series of posts written from the experiences at CREA of implementing a program called "Count Me IN! It's My Body: Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Young Girls through Sports". The first, second, and third posts are available here. CREA is a feminist human rights organization based in Delhi (www.creaworld.org).

I have been working on women's issues at the community level for the last 22 years. My efforts have always focussed on enabling women and girls to access the rights that provide them the status of human beings.

Of these long 22 years, I have mostly worked in villages with women and girls on issues of human rights, violence against women, micro-finance, health and livelihoods. Based on my experiences, I always felt that there is a lack of basic facilities, education, and other development policies and plans in villages; women and girls are not aware and informed; they do not get any services and opportunities; they face violence and discrimination; and since they are not collectivised, they have to deal with many difficulties and complexities in their lives. But, two years back, when I began working in Jhansi, a large urban district in Uttar Pradesh I found many of these notions challenged. As part of CREA's *It's My Body* [1] programme, I work with young girls in five urban *bastis* of Jhansi to collectivise them into groups and give them information on issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights. My experiences from this work in Jhansi, in the last two years, have challenged many of my earlier thoughts and ideas.

I would like to share some of my experiences here in this post.

Ninety-five per cent of men and women in these urban *bastis* work as daily wage labourers. Some of the women work as domestic help through the day. Later in the evening, they, along with their children, do other work to supplement their earnings, such as rolling *bidis*. Most of the girls do not go to school, as they have to look after their siblings or help their mothers at work. The men in the communities where we work are mostly junk/scrap dealers, and their earnings are mainly spent on alcohol. Women work hard all day long to earn their daily wage, which is often forcibly taken away from them at the end of the day by their husbands. In case the women refuse or resist, they are abused, both physically and verbally. Due to lack of space, families often live in one room. The children are witness to the abuse and violence that their mothers face from their fathers. Many houses do not have toilets, which means that every one goes out to use toilets. The young girls cannot go out when it is dark because there is always a fear of harassment, which is quite common. As a result, the families put more restrictions on girls. Incidents where girls were harassed are constantly narrated in order to stop girls from doing what they want to do. The girls who are members of the collectives that have been formed in these five urban *bastis*, as part of our *It's My Body* programme, have reported not eating enough or not eating at all at night, so that they do not have to go to the toilet at night. Out of the 22 girls of the *Nav Jagriti Manch* [2] group, 13 are anaemic. They constantly complain of headaches, dizziness, and weakness. Periods are painful. Some girls shared that their fathers or brothers accompany them while going to the toilet, which makes them feel deeply embarrassed.

Rajni's (*name changed*) father works as a junk/scrap dealer. He spends all his earnings on alcohol. He does not go to work everyday, and violence is a pretty regular feature in the house. Her mother, though, has to work everyday. If she does not go to work one day, the day's meals are difficult. Even then, her father forcibly takes away her mother's earnings to spend on drinking. Rajni faces this every single day. She sees her mother being beaten up, and if she tries to protect her, her father does not even spare her. Rajni, who is a member of the *Nav Jagriti Manch*, shared her problem with others in the collective. After hearing Rajni's story, many other girls in the collective also shared similar experiences. They decided to collectively help each other in fighting this. The next time Rajni's father got violent, Rajni hit him back and threw him out of the house. When the father got angry and said that he would not get her married, Rajni retaliated by saying that she would anyway get married when she wants and with whom she wants.

The girls have now begun to discuss and address their problems together. This was something new for them. The stigma of violence in their homes had always held them back from talking about it, asking for help, or protesting against it. The sharing of similar experiences of violence in a collective like *Nav Jagriti Manch* made Rajni and her friends discuss their problems and give each other strength in speaking out against the violence that they have been dealing with for years. This solidarity enabled them to not just share their experiences but to seek ways to address the problem, an eloquent testimony to the strength of these collectives.

When I meet other collectives of young girls in the villages of Uttar Pradesh, where the same programme is being implemented, I see that the strength of being part of an exclusive group for young girls is equally important. But, the kind of energy, confidence, and courage that the girls in Jhansi draw from their group is very different, unique, and indescribable.

Urban and rural areas and contexts manifest control over girls and restrictions on freedoms in different ways. It would be easy to overlook the nuanced differences and simply say that rural areas are more oppressive. And yet while cities and towns offer women a milieu quite different from the villages, class, caste and gender play out in complex ways and control over freedoms and other restrictions are everyday realities. There are these and many other differences that the context presents us with when we implement our programmes. So, we adapt, change, and modify our strategies and plans accordingly. The rural and urban challenges are equally real. I have been questioning my own beliefs and assumptions about rural and urban areas—there are differences, but is there a real divide? If yes, where is it?

This post was originally written in Hindi.

It has been translated from Hindi to English by Meenu Pandey and Sanjana Gaiind.

Kalpana Khare works at CREA as Program Coordinator, Grassroots Feminist Leadership. Kalpana has 22 years' experience in working on violence against women and women's health issues. She is currently based in Mahoba, Uttar Pradesh, and works closely with the capacity-building programme for community-based groups (*Ibtida* [3] programme) in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh on women's human rights. Her work includes extensive travel to all *Ibtida* members, documenting their work experiences, and ensuring effective reporting of the programme. Kalpana completed her Masters degree in Hindi in 1984 and her Masters in Social Work in 2010.

[1] *It's My Body: Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Adolescent Girls through Sports* is a programme led by CREA and co-implemented with 10 women-led, community-based organisations in rural and urban areas of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh.



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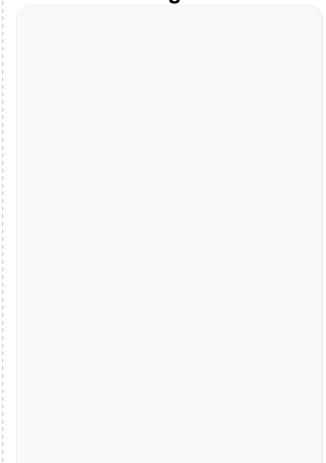
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Feminist reading



[2] **Nav Jagriti Manch** is a collective of adolescent and young girls formed in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, as part of It's My Body programme. CREA co-implements this programme in Jhansi with Virangana Mahila Manch.

[3] **Ibtida** is a network of women-led community-based organisations from the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. With Ibtida, CREA organises trainings and workshops that provide issue-based explorations on sexuality, gender, violence against women, and human rights, as well as opportunities for the sharing of challenges and achievements. CREA organises thematic trainings, ensures the presence of Ibtida members in key national and international discourses, and builds capacities of member organisations to raise funds.

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