

# EMPOWERING GIRLS TO END VIOLENCE



**LESSONS FROM INDIA** FOR  
STOPPING GENDER-BASED  
VIOLENCE

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**“A woman empowered ... has strength.  
She performs with vigor, sees her business  
thrive, and her lamp never goes out.”**

—Proverbs 31:10, 17–28, 25, 31

## ZEENAT'S STORY: FROM VIOLENCE TO HOPE

At 17 years old, Zeenat<sup>1</sup> has been divorced three times. All three of her marriages were against her will. Like many girls in her impoverished community in Hyderabad, India, she had dropped out of school and did not have any vocational skills. Gender discrimination and violence are common and socially accepted among her family and neighbors. Zeenat's poverty is exacerbated by her status as a religious minority. Muslim families in India are often denied access to infrastructure and government resources due to discriminatory attitudes of those in power. And, like many of her peers, Zeenat was first married just after puberty to a man who abused her, an experience that was repeated in her following two marriages. All together, these threads of Zeenat's life weave into a story of violence.

As is the case for many families living in poverty, Zeenat's parents viewed marriage for their post-pubescent daughter as a way to relieve a financial burden on their household. In Zeenat's case, her parents could not afford to pay her dowry, a custom traditionally required for marriage, though not enshrined in Indian law. Instead, they chose to marry her off in exchange for payments from wealthy men from India and the Gulf States, not expecting these marriages to be permanent.

Zeenat's husbands all did the same thing: used her, abused her and then deserted her. She had never been to a doctor after experiencing domestic violence, and was unaware that India's Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 should have legally protected her from abuse, even from her own husbands.

And then Zeenat came to **Shaheen Resource Center for Women**, an organization working in the slums of Hyderabad's Old City to help Muslim and Dalit<sup>2</sup> women and girls combat gender discrimination and violence. She had heard that some girls in her community were going to Shaheen for vocational opportunities, and that the organization helped girls like her escape early marriages and the resulting abuse.

Zeenat enrolled in embroidery classes at Shaheen. She started to open up about her three unwanted marriages and her desire to escape her parents' plans for a fourth. Shaheen helped Zeenat negotiate an agreement with her parents in which they acknowledged her legal right to be



MEMBERS OF SHAHEEN RESOURCE CENTER FOR WOMEN  
PHOTOS AMANDA CARY

### Profile of Success

#### Shaheen Resource Center for Women

**Location:** Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India

**Target Population:** Adolescent girls, women, religious minorities

**Mission:** To help Muslim and Dalit women and girls combat gender discrimination and violence in the slums of Hyderabad's Old City.

#### Programs:

**Health**—Provides a local physician to offer weekly checkups for women and girls. Health education and referrals are main entry points for girls to access other resources. Shaheen also supports a shelter where victims of domestic violence and human trafficking receive counseling, vocational training and legal assistance.

**Education**—Offers support and classes to help girls complete secondary education. English classes, computer classes, embroidery classes and other vocational skills-building opportunities are provided to help girls secure jobs and earn an income. Lessons on girls' rights and addressing domestic violence are woven into these classes.

**Social Change**—Uses peer leaders and outreach staff to conduct home visits, during which Shaheen staff talks to families about the rights of girls in the household. The girls at Shaheen participate in public demonstrations to raise the visibility of their mission within the community.

**Legal Rights**—Integrates education about legal rights throughout all other programs. In particular, Shaheen educates marginalized and vulnerable girls and women about their rights under the Indian Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005.

<sup>1</sup> All names of individuals profiled in this paper have been changed to protect their privacy.

<sup>2</sup> Dalits, the "untouchables" of India's caste system, continue to suffer from extreme discrimination in the areas of housing, access to water, land rights, education and access to the legal system.

protected from early marriage and domestic violence. She was then referred to a doctor to determine whether her abuse had resulted in pregnancy or HIV infection so that she could obtain the appropriate healthcare.

At the same time, Shaheen provided her with vocational training to enable her to become financially independent and therefore less likely to fall victim to a future abusive marriage. If Zeenat does marry again, she will have the support of her family, the knowledge and resources to exercise her rights, the access to services to help her stay safe and healthy, and the ability to leave the marriage if she chooses.

## ADOLESCENT GIRLS: HALTING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

The purpose of this paper is to untangle the many threads that put Zeenat and other adolescent girls like her around the globe at such great risk for violence, and to then articulate a new approach for ending that violence. If violence against women and girls is fueled by poverty, inadequate health systems, lack of education and economic opportunities, harmful social norms and ineffective legal systems that feed gender discrimination, then all of these complex factors must be addressed together as part of a comprehensive, multi-sectoral solution to violence. *And that solution must start with adolescent girls.*

Targeting interventions to adolescent girls offers them the opportunity for an alternative to the narrative of poverty, early marriage, disempowerment and abuse that is all too common in many countries. **Awaaz-e-Niswaan (AEN)**, a Mumbai-based organization profiled later in this paper, demonstrates the effectiveness of such an approach. AEN began focusing more intensely on adolescent girls after community members consistently ranked this population as one of their highest priorities. Many women involved with AEN pressed the organization to better equip and educate girls now to deal with the violence and poverty they would face later in life. The idea is to intervene early, before violence is experienced, to empower girls to negotiate their rights within domestic relationships and to provide them with options so they can make free and informed decisions.

Each girl's experience of violence is unique, but Zeenat's story is unfortunately typical for many poor adolescent girls in her community, her country and around the world. Violence keeps girls like Zeenat in poverty by leaving them



PHOTO DAVID ROTBARD

physically or emotionally unable to secure the education or training needed to earn an income. Violence, or the threat of violence, also keeps girls from access to or awareness of their legal rights to education, healthcare, social services and freedom from abuse.

At the same time, poverty fuels more violence by limiting the available infrastructure, opportunities and support for girls to escape abuse. Adolescent girls like Zeenat, living without access to education, adequate healthcare, ration cards, social security, electricity or income-generating opportunities, are at the greatest risk for domestic violence. They are utterly dependent on their abusers for everything from shelter to food to clothing.

Poverty drives early marriage as well, which has also been shown to increase vulnerability to violence. Adolescent girls pushed into early marriages often lack status and power within their households and are therefore more likely to experience domestic violence, sexual abuse and isolation from family and community.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice*. New York: UNICEF, 2005.

The drivers and effects of violence put girls in extremely vulnerable situations. Laws that protect and support these girls are needed to intervene and break the cycle. However, even where they exist, such laws are too often weak, and awareness of and access to them by those who need them most tend to be limited. Without effective implementation of laws protecting them from violence, too many girls are left without recourse. In this way, they have no independence, no choices and no chance to break free, and the cycle of poverty and violence continues.

## A NEW SOLUTION TO VIOLENCE AND A NEW NARRATIVE FOR GIRLS

Violence against adolescent girls and women is not only a gross human rights abuse and an affront to human dignity, it is also a major impediment to achieving global development goals. Violence is both a risk factor for and an effect of poverty, hunger and disease. By some estimates, women and girls make up 70 percent of the global poor.<sup>4</sup> And one out of every three women worldwide is physically abused.<sup>5</sup> These disturbing statistics are integrally related, but poverty and violence do not have to be inevitabilities. We know by now that investing in women and girls is the most effective way to reduce both. As the World Bank reports, “women and girls reinvest an average of 90 percent of their income in their families, compared to a 30 to 40 percent reinvestment rate for men.”<sup>6</sup> Stopping violence against adolescent girls and women is therefore not only a humanitarian goal, but an economic one. Thus it must be made a critical component of U.S. foreign assistance work in developing countries. To be effective, U.S. development policy must take a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to stopping violence against women and girls so that the many different risk factors and needs of girls like Zeenat can be addressed.

Unfortunately, this is currently not the case. While U.S. funding does a tremendous amount of good around the globe, there are few programs directed explicitly toward adolescent girls. Furthermore, the programs that do exist too often operate in silos. Girls can access education from a program financed by one stream of funding, healthcare from another and vocational skills from yet another.

<sup>4</sup>United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). “Women, Poverty & Economics.” UNIFEM, 2010. Web. 20 September 2010 <[http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/women\\_poverty\\_economics/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/)>.

<sup>5</sup>Women Thrive Worldwide. “Violence Against Women.” Women Thrive Worldwide, 2010. Web. 20 September 2010 <[http://www.womenthrive.org/index.php?option=com\\_issues&view=issue&id=5&Itemid=115](http://www.womenthrive.org/index.php?option=com_issues&view=issue&id=5&Itemid=115)>.

<sup>6</sup>U.S. Department of State. “Secretary’s International Fund for Women and Girls: Why Women? Why Now?” U.S. Department of State, 2010. Web. 20 September 2010. <<http://www.state.gov/s/gwi/womensfund/why/index.htm>>.

Inflexible, single-sector solutions are inefficient because Zeenat and her peers face not one or two but an interconnected multitude of challenges. Adolescent girls and young women in the developing world do not have the time, money or freedom of movement to access disparate and distant support services. The most effective programs, therefore, are those that offer a “one-stop shop,” with an integrated set of tools and resources available to link together multiple sectors and support systems.

U.S. government efforts are currently missing key opportunities to coordinate and target complementary programs that effectively prevent and respond to violence. A girl who needs medical care for abuse also needs shelter so she does not have to return to her abuser. If she seeks legal counsel to prosecute a case but is not given support to challenge attitudes condoning violence in her family, she will return to the same risky environment. Similarly, a girl who seeks vocational opportunities to support herself and her family could be further empowered by learning how to access the justice system to help her escape from an abusive situation.

## BUILDING A ONE-STOP SHOP TO END VIOLENCE

The examples below highlight how several Indian NGOs are finding success by using a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to offer the wide range of tools and resources girls need to decrease their risk factors for violence. In each case, the organizations use a single entry point of support to connect girls to a broad network of interventions addressing violence. Building on the successes achieved by these organizations in their local communities, U.S. policies and funds could be doing much more to support, amplify and replicate this effective model across the globe.

### The Health Sector: One Entry Point to Stopping Violence

*“We saw daily hospital reports of violence, yet little intervention beyond the immediate medical needs of the victims. Hospitals treated their physical conditions and then sent girls back to their abusive situations.”*

—Dr. Wasundhara Joshi, executive director of SNEHA

A health facility is often the first entry point to a social support system that brings an end to the violence in a girl’s life. In too many cases, adolescent girls first seek health services only after experiencing violence. When this happens, they have a range of immediate health and safety concerns, as well as long-term needs that extend



PHOTO JOLIE SCHWAB

well beyond the health system. Both the physical and psychological effects of violence—as well as the risk factors associated with it—must be addressed.

Girls who have been raped require post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), a short-term course of antiretroviral treatment that can help prevent HIV infection if it is provided immediately after possible exposure. Sexual violence greatly intensifies a girl's risk of contracting HIV because it increases her exposure to the virus through tearing and abrasions. When infection does occur, HIV/AIDS not only takes a direct physical toll, but also deepens a girl's isolation through stigma, discrimination and loss of education and economic opportunities, further feeding the cycle of poverty and violence. This cycle must be interrupted early on by health interventions to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS.

Girls who are raped must also have access to emergency contraception. Pregnancy is dangerous for adolescent girls whose reproductive systems are not fully developed, and they are at a much higher risk for both maternal and infant mortality. Access to emergency contraception can help prevent these tragic consequences.

When a pregnancy does occur, girls must be engaged in a continuum of care to ensure the long-term health and well-being of themselves and their children. Early childbirth not only physically weakens an adolescent girl, but also potentially entrenches her in a cycle of poverty by limiting her educational and vocational opportunities early on, and increasing her dependence on a husband and/or family members who may be abusive. In such a vulnerable position, girls require long-term access to maternal and child health services, alongside treatment for their short-term medical needs.

## Profile of Success

### Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA)

**Location:** Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

**Target Population:** Women and children in Mumbai's urban slums

**Mission:** To build a sustainable model of social change that works both to address treatable medical problems and to empower women and children.

#### Programs:

**Health**—Runs a hospital and shelter in Mumbai's Dharavi slum, the largest in Asia, where its center for women and children in crisis is committed to restoring the physical, emotional and psychological health of victims of domestic violence. SNEHA provides sexual and reproductive health services, prenatal medical care, health education, health and laboratory services, and an HIV/AIDS training and counseling center.

**Education**—Provides sexual and reproductive health information and teaches girls about their rights. To help girls and women raise their socioeconomic status, SNEHA provides vocational training, income-generation programs, nursing courses, a library and study classes. The organization also offers preschool and day care, as well as a senior citizen center.

**Social Change**—Works to change social attitudes and behaviors around violence through community groups led by young women themselves. SNEHA empowers girls and their families on issues regarding their health, their rights and the resources available to them to prevent and respond to violence. SNEHA also does outreach into the community, particularly to street children and adolescents.

**Legal Rights**—Links girls to legal services and helps them register reports of violence with police. SNEHA monitors and reports on violence in the community and uses its findings to advocate for the enforcement of the Indian Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005.

The integration of these many health services maximizes the likelihood that girls will be given choices that will keep them safe and healthy. If such services are not available in a one-stop shop, it is nearly impossible for girls to access the full range of care they need.

Just as health-sector services must be integrated, they must also be combined with interventions from other sectors that offer girls the education, vocational, legal and social support necessary to stop the cycle of poverty and violence. Since a healthcare facility is often an entry point for adolescent girls, it is also an opportunity to refer them to these other resources designed to prevent and respond to violence.

While it is clearly impractical for every organization to offer a full range of services, it is certainly possible to offer multiple services and make referrals for other needs. This requires flexible funding and capacity building to support the one-stop shop approach to integrated health services and other interventions, which consistently achieves better health outcomes, including reduced incidence of violence. A number of organizations are using health-related programs to link girls to a wide range of interventions to empower them to help end violence both in their homes and throughout their country.

**Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA)** was started after its founders recognized gaps in how the public health system addressed violence. They understood that a girl seeking medical care for violence also needs shelter to be able to leave her abusive situation. She needs counseling services to deal with the emotional and psychological impact of violence, as well as to navigate further threats of violence in her community. And she needs legal services to enable her to prosecute her case, and education and vocational training to empower her to exercise her right to live free of violence.

SNEHA also recognizes that girls who access health services for reasons other than violence—usually for maternal and child health services—are still vulnerable to abuse. Regardless of the reasons a girl seeks medical help, she is linked to services outside the health system that can reduce her vulnerability to violence and support her if and when she does experience it.

## Education and Economic Opportunity: Building Bridges to a Violence-Free World

*“If a woman is illiterate and then gets married, she is stuck. If her husband beats her, she can’t leave because she has no options.”* —Asmat, a 21-year-old peer group leader for adolescent girls at Awaaz-e-Niswaan

Educating a girl and giving her the training she needs to secure economic opportunities is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty and violence. Vocational skills training and access to technologies have been shown to increase women’s control over resources, broaden political awareness and ultimately reduce cases of domestic violence.<sup>7</sup> But research has also shown that adolescent girls are missing out on early education and other vocational opportunities that could empower them as women to access the income, assets and resources they need to prevent or respond to domestic violence.

Without education and skills training, girls and women often have little access to the formal economy, which can place them in dangerous work and financial situations. Young women in poverty must often turn to the informal sector for employment, including sex work or transactional sex in exchange for food or shelter. In this way, lack of education puts girls in vulnerable situations over the long term by limiting their future economic opportunities.

Among marginalized populations, such as the Muslim and Dalit communities in India, adolescent girls have even less access to education and economic resources. Often living in areas with poor educational infrastructure, these girls also have particularly low school enrollment and retention rates because of their roles as caretakers and providers in the family as well as social norms that curtail their education after puberty. Globally, girls work longer hours than boys, cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood, and caring for siblings and ailing family members.<sup>8</sup> With all the challenges that keep marginalized girls from getting the education and training they need to live a life free from violence, this population deserves special attention and requires culturally appropriate and locally led educational and vocational opportunities, as well as the integration of these opportunities as entry points to a larger support system that empowers girls with knowledge of their rights. **Awaaz-e-Niswaan (AEN)** demonstrates how this work can be done.

A hallmark of AEN is a scholarship program that supports young women and girls to go to college. Initially this program was started for the daughters of women seeking legal support and counseling at AEN. But word has spread and now girls come seeking scholarships after learning about AEN from relatives or friends or during surveys conducted by the organization.

<sup>7</sup>Women Thrive Worldwide. “Women’s Economic Opportunity: Helping to End Gender-Based Violence and Poverty.” Women Thrive Worldwide, July 2009. Web. 20 September 2010 <<http://www.womenthrive.org/images/gbv%20and%20poverty%20brief%20updated%20july%202009-1.pdf>>.

<sup>8</sup>Levine, Ruth, et al. *Girls Count: A Global Investment & Action Agenda*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development, 2009.



## Profile of Success

### Awaaz-e-Niswaan (AEN)

**Location:** Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

**Target Population:** Adolescent girls, women, religious minorities

**Mission:** To provide a space for marginalized women and girls to come together to address gender discrimination and violence, and to support every woman and girl in achieving self-determination.

#### Programs:

**Health**—Provides health education through its ongoing support groups, during which participants discuss issues such as the negative health impacts of marriage and childbearing at a young age.

**Education**—Offers a scholarship program to help girls complete their education through college. AEN links girls in the scholarship program to other educational and vocational skills-building opportunities including language, computer and painting lessons. AEN also helps girls secure jobs through partnerships with local companies.

**Social Change**—Provides a space for dialogue to challenge gender discrimination and attitudes that lead to violence. AEN is a visible force in the community and raises awareness about the rights of women and girls.

**Legal Rights**—Engages in advocacy campaigns for matrimonial rights, alimony and property rights, and against domestic and sexual violence. AEN teaches girls and women how to file police reports and how to interact with authority figures to demand their rights.



MEMBERS OF GIRLS RISE INDIA MEMBERS OF AWAAZ-E-NISWAAN

PHOTOS AMANDA CARY

AEN reaches out to girls whose needs are both unmet within their own communities and consistently neglected by the state. By offering scholarships to any girl who has a desire to learn, not just those who have excelled academically, the organization engages girls who have dropped out of school because of their family's financial circumstances or because of restricted mobility due to safety concerns and/or religious sanctions.

One of the organization's main goals is to educate women and girls about the full range of rights they can claim as women and as minorities. AEN offers workshops on self defense, health rights, protection against sexual harassment and effectively accessing law enforcement services to its scholarship participants and to other women and girls who seek assistance from the organization.

Because early marriage is a risk factor for domestic violence in its community, AEN also works on several issues related to matrimonial rights and violence. Many young girls who came to AEN for education and vocational training leave armed with crucial, empowering knowledge about gender issues and their legal rights.

Significantly, AEN has learned that simply having a stand-alone scholarship program is an insufficient intervention for communities dealing with poverty, violence and gender discrimination. It therefore combines its scholarship program with vocational training, counseling and support for women and girls in crisis; uses vocational training and group support systems as an entry point for talking about human rights more broadly; and engages in political advocacy for the rights of vulnerable women and girls. In this way, AEN empowers girls and women to access support and services across many sectors so that they have the tools they need to lead full and active lives free from violence.



PHOTO JENNA CAPECI

## Social Change: Employing Local Leadership to Shift Gender Attitudes

*“The difference between the position I was in before and where I am now is like the difference between the ground and the sky.” —Yasmin, a 19-year-old peer group leader for adolescent girls at Girls Rise India\**

Without addressing the underlying social norms that drive gender discrimination and violence, particularly within impoverished and marginalized communities, programs geared towards preventing violence cannot ultimately be effective. This work is highly sensitive and involves challenging long-established practices and beliefs, such as those promoting child marriage, dowry obligations, discriminatory divorce customs, unequal inheritance and acceptance or sanctioning of violence against women and girls. It is therefore critical that we recognize how each of these social attitudes can increase a girl’s risk of experiencing violence. For instance, sometimes early marriage is the only way for a young woman to escape the violence in her family, yet that same marriage also puts her at risk of further violence. Discriminatory social norms and attitudes both put girls at risk for violence and compound that risk by inhibiting social mobility and access to education, legal support and health services.

Safe space for dialogue is an essential first step in challenging the discriminatory attitudes that lead to violence. Programs must empower a cadre of influential and culturally knowledgeable community leaders to challenge the attitudes of their neighbors, friends and families. This process, of course, requires the participation of boys and men. The fact that men are often the perpetrators of violence means that ending it also depends



PHOTO JOLIE SCHWAB

## FATIMA'S STORY

*Married at 15 years old, Fatima is skinny, but has a strong face and powerful voice. She was deserted by her husband when she got pregnant. She is from a poor Muslim family and had neither an education nor a means of supporting herself and her child. She had nowhere to turn and felt that life was over. Then she came to Girls Rise India where she was told, “Life starts today.” Fatima now leads groups that train government officials and police about the rights of women and girls. She is even filing a legal case to get back the land to which she is entitled after her divorce. She says she wants her daughter to grow up to be strong.*

on their engagement, and not only in the domestic spheres. In their roles as judges, politicians and law enforcement agents, men hold the authority needed to enforce protection from violence.

Traditional concepts of masculinity often condone or encourage abuse of women and girls by men and boys. To address these attitudes and beliefs, boys and men must have a place to question how traditional gender roles may negatively impact their relationships with the women and girls in their lives and how gender discrimination can harm the community as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Because men hold positions of both domestic and public power, they have the potential to contribute to significant social change. To encourage this, they need to be supported in promoting more equitable gender norms.

In addition to involving men and boys as needed allies for change, altering social beliefs requires outreach to multiple influential figures in the community, including school and law enforcement officials and local governing bodies. Engaging local leadership to create systemic, long-term change in both customs and laws is a critical strategy that should be employed in working to reduce violence.

And, of course, women’s and girls’ social beliefs regarding their own sense of empowerment must change as well. **Girls Rise India**, a community-based organization, demonstrates how a program can work to change social norms by empowering adolescent girls to become agents of that change.

By empowering girls with the negotiating skills needed to challenge discriminatory attitudes in their families and communities, Girls Rise India is building a strong cohort of young women leaders who are making it possible for

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.



MEMBERS OF SHAHEEN RESOURCE CENTER FOR WOMEN

PHOTOS AMANDA CARY

others to access the tools they need to stay safe, while working to change local attitudes about gender. For girls in these communities, it can be a challenge just to get permission to leave their homes to meet in the Girls Rise India center in the first place. Therefore, much of these leaders' work involves outreach to their own families, friends and neighbors to help them take advantage of Girls Rise India's efforts in the community, thereby gradually gaining acceptance as empowered young women. The girl leaders also talk to local education boards, health boards and law enforcement officials to promote the struggle against gender discrimination within these institutions and make them more responsive to violence against women and girls.

Girls Rise India is in a critical position to create change in its community because its members are part of that community. They have the specific cultural knowledge needed to challenge harmful religious and patriarchal practices, as well as the legal knowledge to be able to use Indian constitutional law to enforce positive changes.

Girls Rise India provides a safe space inside the community through peer-led support groups targeted to specific populations of vulnerable girls—including Muslim and Dalit girls, girls with disabilities and married adolescents—offering solutions tailored to each girl's situation. For example, a group designed specifically for Muslim girls begins conversations with the Quran, pointing out the many instances of women's rights established in the text and distinguishing those from local customs that condone violence. As in other successful models, Girls Rise India provides an integrated empowerment approach. Each peer-led support group offers an entry point to education and vocational skills training as well as health information and referrals, legal support and leadership opportunities within the organization.

The girl group leaders at Girls Rise India use social dialogue to bring more and more girls into a wider network of support that can prevent and respond to violence. The organization has staged rallies, performed street theater and distributed T-shirts demanding the protection of their rights. The girls work to impact perceptions of gender equality first within their own families. This helps them gain credibility and be seen and respected as agents of reform. This model has the power to create lasting progress as family by family, neighbor by neighbor, a community learns to accept girls and women as empowered leaders making positive change.

## Profile of Success Girls Rise India\*

**Location:** Mumbai, Maharashtra, India\*

**Target Population:** Adolescent girls, women, religious minorities

*\*The name and location of the organization profiled here have been changed to protect its members, who are operating in a highly sensitive environment.*

**Mission:** To reduce violence and gender-based discrimination in rural communities and provide support services to survivors of domestic violence.

### Programs:

**Health**—Offers workshops on sexual and reproductive health. Older girls and young women counsel younger ones on healthy sexual relationships, childbirth and sexual violence, providing them with the information and resources they need to keep themselves safe and healthy.

**Education**—Conducts vocational training, leadership programs, and peer learning and collective problem-solving activities, which build girls' capacities to secure financial independence, resist gender-based discrimination, improve their health and education, delay marriages and protect themselves from violence.

**Social Change**—Challenges prevailing social and religious norms that are harmful to women and girls through facilitated community discussions. The organization uses a peer group model to talk about the need to educate girls and end violence within the home.

**Legal Rights**—Engages adolescent girls in regular meetings, trainings and exposure visits with local law enforcement and governing bodies to promote their rights and legal protections from violence.



PHOTO JOLIE SCHWAB

## Legal Rights: Preventing and Responding to Violence Through Government Accountability

*“There are also many educated people who don’t know their rights. Without knowing rights, we can’t change society.” —Aminah, 20-year-old peer group leader for adolescent girls at Awaaz-e-Niswaan*

Legal provisions and enforcement are among the most fundamental tools for a government to respond to and prevent violence. During the pivotal 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, governments worldwide declared that violence against women constitutes a violation of basic human rights and is an obstacle to achieving equality, development and peace. Through the establishment and enforcement of legal provisions, governments can be held accountable to this human rights commitment. In practice, however, despite the existence of some progressive laws in many countries, implementation remains weak, underfunded and ineffective.

India, for example, has several laws in place that could help prevent and respond to violence against girls. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, which specifies that a girl must be 18 and a boy 21 years of age before they can marry, could

## Profile of Success SAHAYOG

**Location:** Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

**Target Population:** Rural communities, youth, women and girls, men and boys

**Mission:** To promote gender equality and women’s health from a human rights perspective.

### Programs:

**Health**—Works with youth to educate them about their sexual and reproductive health needs and how to access their health rights. SAHAYOG provides support to survivors of domestic violence through a partnership with a local crisis center. The organization uses research and documentation in local communities and at the regional and national policy levels to hold the government accountable for enforcing health rights.

**Education**—Teaches youth and marginalized populations how to exercise their rights. SAHAYOG builds leadership capacity through trainings and workshops to prepare participants to be changemakers in their communities. The organization links health services and education to a broader range of interventions aimed at empowering girls with socioeconomic, legal and political resources.

**Social Change**—Works to bring an understanding of violence against women and girls as a violation of human rights through public advocacy and media campaigns. SAHAYOG also does critical work with boys and men to promote gender equality and end violence against girls and women.

**Legal Rights**—Partners with organizations and networks across Uttar Pradesh on a campaign to promote awareness and enforcement of the Indian Protection of Women from the Domestic Violence Act. Campaign activities included rallies, street plays, dramas, pamphlet and poster distribution, and meetings with many district-level policymakers.

prevent girls from being forced into the early marriages that put them at such great risk for domestic violence. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 mandates that women and girls who experience violence are entitled to immediate services such as medical treatment and shelter, and establishes judicial mechanisms to prosecute cases of physical and mental abuse, including domestic violence, rape, threats, sexual harassment and economic abuse. It also delineates relevant standards of conduct for police officers, includes awareness and sensitivity training, and builds in a budget requirement for implementation.<sup>19</sup> **SAHAYOG**, an organization based in Lucknow, advocates for better implementation of these laws as an integral part of its mission to empower girls to grow up free of violence.

Many girls and women first come to Shaheen, SNEHA, SAHAYOG, AEN and Girls Rise India because they or their female relatives are seeking legal assistance for marriage- and violence-related cases. These organizations offer their clients legal support to prosecute their cases, while at the same time proactively engage local law enforcement and judicial officials to both respond to and prevent violence.

For example, AEN teaches girls and women to navigate the criminal justice system through hands-on learning. Girls go in groups to the police station where they observe how AEN reports cases of violence. They are given the opportunity to interact with police personnel directly, which helps to alleviate their fear of approaching authority figures. Since AEN works with the Muslim community, it is well-positioned to manage the tension between customs practiced within families and Indian constitutional law.

On a local, case-by-case level, these organizations are highly successful at holding perpetrators of violence accountable—be it formally through legal prosecution or informally through community pressure. Additionally, they organize visible public meetings, conferences, regional forums and media events to highlight problems with implementation of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. In these ways, they leverage the impact of individual successes and are more effective in pressing local governments to enforce the laws. With each case of violence successfully prosecuted and each public forum bringing attention to the requirements of the law, communities become more aware that violence against women and girls has consequences—because women and girls have rights.



PHOTO ELLE TODER

It is crucial to note here that the groups that are successful in prosecuting cases and pressuring local officials to implement the laws are the same ones offering education and economic opportunities, connecting girls to health information and referrals, and providing spaces to build the leadership needed to challenge discriminatory social norms. By working across these many sectors in a comprehensive, integrated way, Shaheen, SNEHA, AEN, SAHAYOG and Girls Rise India are harnessing every available opportunity to stop violence in the lives and communities of these girls.

### RAMLAH'S STORY

*Ramlah was married at the age of 14 and got pregnant soon after. She came to AEN seeking help to get a divorce from her abusive husband at age 15. With AEN's help, she was finally divorced at age 17, and moved back in with her parents. Ramlah wanted a job to support herself. However, she had never been allowed outside of her home unaccompanied by a relative and had no vocational training. In addition, she was timid and lacked the confidence and skills to secure a job. AEN's outreach staff came to her home to talk with her parents about the educational and vocational programs they offer for Muslim girls, and they agreed to let her participate in AEN's activities. After spending time at AEN, Ramlah gained confidence, enabling her to secure a job and eventually buy a house with her own earnings. Now age 30, Ramlah is married again, this time by choice. She considers AEN to be her family and continues her participation as a volunteer counselor to support other young women and girls facing violence.*

<sup>19</sup>Lawyers Collective Women's Rights Initiative. "Protection Of Women From Domestic Violence Act 2005." Lawyers Collective Women's Rights Initiative. Web. 20 September 2010 <<http://www.unifem.org.in/PDF/DV-Presentation-booklet.pdf>>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: How the U.S. Can Support a Comprehensive Approach to End Violence Against Girls

Violence takes place when women and girls do not have social, political, economic or legal power within their families, communities and countries. This gender inequality hinders both their capacity to prevent violence from occurring and to find support after surviving it. Physical and emotional violence prevents girls from reaching their full potential, driving them further into poverty, which in turn increases their risk for more violence, thus perpetuating the cycle. Ultimately, it prevents women from fully participating in the economic and political life of their societies and undermines development goals of reducing poverty, hunger and disease.

The U.S. has recently increased its focus on gender issues, including violence, but as of yet lacks the coordination, dedicated funding and multi-sectoral strategy required to comprehensively address the myriad factors that lead to violence against women and girls in the developing world. All too often, programs operate in separate sectors with parallel, inflexible funding streams. Successful pilot programs started in one setting are often not given the needed support to continue, replicate or expand. These programs also lack the adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms needed to assess their effectiveness.

To ensure that no opportunity is missed to stop violence in the lives of young girls, the U.S. needs to improve coordination and funding across multiple sectors in local settings. It can do so by:

### 1. SUPPORTING LOCAL GROUPS ALREADY DOING THIS WORK

As the U.S. seeks ways to advance its work to fight violence against women and girls, it should start by building the capacity and effectiveness of groups already doing this work across multiple sectors. Because local organizations have the trust of their communities and the knowledge of local social norms, groups such as those highlighted in this paper are best placed to develop solutions that will work in their particular settings. Such groups must therefore be included in the design, implementation and monitoring of U.S. anti-violence programs.



PHOTO SANDHYA GUPTA

### 2. PROVIDING FLEXIBLE FUNDING FOR A MULTI-SECTORAL APPROACH

In order to support local groups and expand support for new groups, the U.S. must allow for flexible funding for the needs established by local stakeholders. Groups cannot offer comprehensive services if they are restricted by unwieldy, parallel funding structures. Gender and violence indicators must also be a requirement across sectors and throughout U.S. foreign assistance programs to ensure that women's specific needs and prevailing gender inequalities are taken into account in the planning, implementation and evaluation of all programs.

### 3. BOLSTERING U.S. LEADERSHIP

To support such comprehensive programs and the local organizations providing them, the U.S. must make stopping violence against women and girls a diplomatic priority. It must wield its power as a global leader to champion the cause of empowerment for women and girls around the world and use its influence to encourage other countries to adopt legislation and enforce human rights.

## EMPOWERING GIRLS TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE

When girls are empowered, they are able to utilize their rights, resources and personal agency to lead a life free of violence. Empowerment comes with the availability of and access to health services, education and economic opportunities, and an adequate social safety net to support vulnerable populations. It comes with safe spaces to challenge social norms and gender discrimination. And it comes with the knowledge and access needed to exercise one's rights and participate in the political process.

Violence is an economic and legal issue as well as a social one, and must be addressed as such by the U.S. and the world community when funding anti-violence programs. By comprehensively reversing the many ways adolescent girls are routinely disempowered and made vulnerable to violence, we can support them in forging a new path.

Empowered girls grow up to be empowered women who can raise their children in a violence-free environment, teach others about gender equality, contribute to raising the economic status of their families and communities, and hold their governments accountable for securing their rights. They become doctors, teachers, social workers, lawyers and community organizers. Most of all, they become agents of change for a new world—one that is free of violence—for the next generation of girls.



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