

Sadbhavana Trust, Uttar Pradesh

Building leadership of adolescent girls and young women from marginalised communities

Since 2009, Sadbhavana Trust has been working with under-privileged marginalised communities in low-income areas of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Sadbhavana Trust seeks to build capacity and leadership of adolescent girls, young and adult women from these marginalised communities, who are often faced with issues of limited access to education, employment and lack of resources. Its programs primarily focus on: skill development of adolescent girls and young women from a feminist perspective; provision of legal aid and counselling to survivors of gender based violence; and youth mobilisation for initiating social change within their communities.

Addressing contextual constraints faced by adolescent girls and young women from marginalised communities

The marginalised communities with whom Sadbhavana works, are confronted with lack of resources and basic facilities, including those related to water, health, sanitation and education. In addition, women and girls within these communities also have to contend with deeply entrenched patriarchal values and cultural and religious barriers in pursuing their life and career plans. They encounter lack of access to education, information, skills, and restrictive attitudes, leaving them with little or no opportunity to expand their horizons or make informed choices in their lives. Adolescent girls and young women are also vulnerable to early and child marriage.

Deeply embedded patriarchal attitudes view adolescent girls and young women as 'burden'. Families are also not willing to invest time and energy in increasing their life prospects. Within the limited opportunities for education and employment available to these marginalised communities, boys are prioritised over adolescent girls. Patriarchal mindset is also prevalent in the protectionist attitude towards adolescent girls and young women, where families exercise constant control over their sexuality and mobility. Current political climate within which minorities are being targeted for abuse and violence, has further deepened fear within the



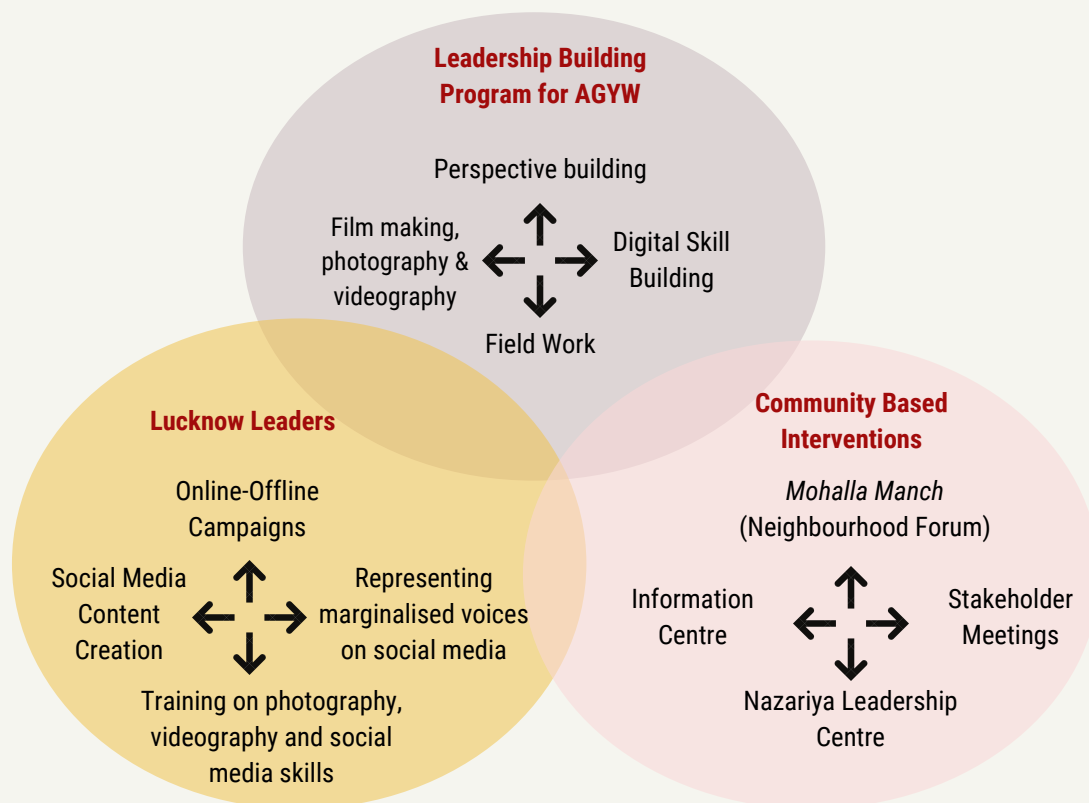
community, leading to more severe restrictions on mobility of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW).

Within this social milieu of poverty and marginalisation, marriage is seen as a lucrative option to rid the family of care-giving responsibilities and is perceived as a way of ensuring 'security' of adolescent girls and young women. This, in turn, affects their education, livelihood, health and well-being prospects.

Sadbhavana's programs aim to provide education and livelihood skills and opportunities for adolescent girls and young women, which allow them to pursue alternatives to getting married. They also address the gaps in accessing technology for personal and professional use faced by adolescent girls and young women from these communities. The programs seek to develop feminist perspective building and leadership along with digital skill building, in order to build confidence and self-esteem to voice their opinions and enhance their negotiation skills. This is particularly significant in the context of India, where there are limited spaces that advance and nurture leadership of marginalised women, especially those belonging to low-income communities.

Through sustained engagement with adolescent girls and young women from these marginalised communities, Sadbhavana Trust seeks to create change makers who can challenge patriarchal norms and exercise decision making power within their own lives, as well as within their families and communities.

SADBHAVANA'S APPROACH



Sadbhavana's **leadership building program** combines **feminist perspective building** with **skill building** so that adolescent girls and young women are able to explore the world, express themselves, think creatively, push boundaries and also pursue alternatives of education and livelihood, beyond marriage. The leadership program also has elements of **community exposure/ field work** and **digital storytelling and photography skill building** in-built in its structure. This allows young leaders to implement the skills gained through the training to address practical issues in the community.

Through perspective building, young leaders are exposed to ideas around gender, sexuality, patriarchy, discrimination, communalism, mobility and violence. Skill building focuses on equipping them with a range of skills related to social media, computers, career counselling, English speaking and life skills, among others. By focusing on digital skills, the program addresses a crucial gendered barrier in accessing technology faced by adolescent girls and young women.

Similarly, the underpinning feminist values within the program ensures that the focus is not merely on attaining skills and increasing their prospects within the marriage market, but seeks to transform their perspective and help them in developing independent identity and thinking. The leadership program is also offered at an advance level. Here, the focus is on building perspective to deal with issues emerging from the community and to sharpen skills around

digital storytelling, photography and interviewing, which can be used to generate stories of discrimination and resistance from within the community.

Community Based Interventions

In implementing centre-based leadership programs, Sadbhavana realised that many adolescent girls and young women could not participate in the program owing to mobility restrictions. The program was then decentralised to reach community members. There are several elements to this community engagement.

Through the **Mohalla Manch (neighbourhood forums)** adolescent girls and young women from the community are exposed to perspective building aimed at challenging entrenched patriarchal thought process. The **Nazariya Leadership Development Centre**, is an innovative initiative through which Sadbhavana seeks to reach marginalised women and girls from the community who have been deprived from accessing technology. These young community leaders receive training to build digital skills as well as life skills. Exposure visits to centres run by local organisations and government offices are arranged to enhance their perspective and build connections with different community stakeholders. Stakeholder meeting with local health and government officials is also conducted to expand their knowledge on issues faced by women and girls in the community.

The Information Centre run at the community level provides information on government schemes, entitlements and services and supports community members in accessing different identity documents required to access these schemes. The Centre also provides basic computer skills to young women from minoritised and marginalised communities.

Through these varied efforts, Sadbhavana seeks to ensure that adolescent girls and young women are able to understand their own talents, capacities and dreams, articulate aspirations, think beyond prescribed gender norms, strive for equality within different relationships and be financially independent.

Enhancing digital skills, creating a window to the world

Adolescent girls and young women face issues of control and surveillance while using technology, which restricts their self-expression. Sadbhavana focuses on digital skill building as a way to break gender stereotypes and traditional male dominance in the field and also increase mobility of adolescent girls and young women. It allows them to access and interact with the wider world, much beyond their immediate locality. Through the digital world, they are able to amplify community issues and voices and share their life stories in their own voice.

The focus on digital skills has also evolved into a separate Film Studio which is being run by the young women leaders who have emerged from the program. Films, documentaries, vlogs and video editing is undertaken by the video unit on a range of themes including gender, identity, mobility, religious perspectives, women's rights and challenges of accessing government schemes. The Film Studio, thus, is a unique initiative to teach Muslim women and girls the art of photography and filmmaking, build their technical skills and establish their identity as independent women working in media.

Films made by the Film Studio, along with other Bollywood films, are screened for the community as a part of the *Mohalla Filmistan* initiative. Issue-based films on politics, religion and women's rights are screened to generate dialogue among women and girls in the community about their lives and their context. This space also offers a non-judgmental and safe space to discuss issues around sexuality, health, education and employment and other related themes that emerge from the films.

CHANGING THE COURSE

Through Sadbhavana's leadership building efforts, adolescent girls' and young women's **capacity of communication and negotiation and their self confidence has significantly enhanced**. They are now able to raise their voice against early marriage and marriage without consent, speak about gender and sexuality more freely, challenge being confined to their house and find new alternatives for their lives. Overall, they feel confident in putting forth their views and opinions and taking decisions at an individual level as well as at the family and community level.

Adolescent girls and young women are **exercising greater control over their mobility and life choices**. They are driven to learn, explore and seek new alternatives and avenues in their lives. There is wide recognition of young women's leadership that has emerged through Sadbhavana's program which has inspired others to join and participate in local collectivisation efforts.

Sadbhavana's interventions have not only sharpened tech skills, but have **inculcated feminist perspective** in adolescent girls and young women. They **actively negotiate** with their families and are committed to finding alternatives to marriage within their lives. They are pursuing livelihood options based on their interest, choice and skills. Many have re-enrolled in schools and colleges and some of them are also able to choose their own partners for marriage.

Adolescent girls and young women are also **exercising leadership at the community level**. Adolescent girls who have emerged from the leadership development program are providing training on a range of issues to community members, and have become focal point on the issues of gender based violence within their communities. They are actively intervening in issues of violence in the community, ensuring follow up of cases and have even designed and executed a 3-month campaign on violence against women. There is marked shift in their confidence and perspective. Through youth fairs, they have been able to engage with community members on questions of gender, patriarchy, discrimination, and sexuality.

Much of the **second-line leadership at Sadbhavana Trust** has also emerged from the young women's leadership program. These young leaders are at helm of running different programs at Sadbhavana and are shaping its future direction. By developing community-led leadership, Sadbhavana's work has also become more sustainable.

LEARNING AND EVOLVING

Committed to building leadership of marginalised girls and young and adult women, the practical aspect of the program has always been central to Sadbhavana's approach. There is constant re-imagining of avenues through which program participants can **apply learning from the trainings to their practical life, expand their sphere of influence, and exercise leadership within the community**. Young leaders are encouraged to address issues outside of the workshop space and scholarship opportunities are made available to enable them to work together and develop practical outputs.

Over the years Sadbhavana has explored different avenues to ensure that adolescent girls and young women have necessary support and access to resources as they develop the confidence to pursue alternatives of their choice. Refresher courses have been initiated which allow participants to brush up on digital skills and use these skills to generate livelihood opportunities. Need based capacity building programs have been developed. Aspirants are also connected with scholarship schemes and opportunities of different kinds, which helps them in pursuing their desired livelihood.

Through these efforts Sadbhavana has also been able to build **continued engagement** with adolescent girls and young women, an area which required greater focus to enable sustained change. In addition, WhatsApp groups

and collectivisation of different clusters and batches of young leaders was started to instill a sense of solidarity. This emerged as a space for adolescent girls and young women to stay engaged on emerging issues within the community. Young leaders have begun to appreciate the need to stay connected and organised among themselves, in order to take action on local issues within the community. This model of building community leadership of adolescent girls and young women and involving them in community work has also led to ensuring their sustained engagement and leadership in relief efforts during the Covid crisis.

To expand the sphere of influence of these young leaders, **networking opportunities** for them also emerged as an important focus area. Sadbhavana continues to seek opportunities for them to attend network meetings, external workshops and other learning opportunities, which allows them to engage with a wider audience.

In all the years that Sadbhavana has been active, building its own capacity and expanding its analysis and reach has been at the heart of its functioning. In the future too, Sadbhavana will endeavour to strengthen its engagement with other stakeholders in the community and develop initiatives to involve women from the community in digital literacy skill training.



This document traces the journey of Sadbhavana Trust in transforming gender relations, particularly its work in addressing the root causes of early and child marriage. Compiled by a group of external consultants, it is a reflection of the organisation's journey primarily from 2017 to 2020.

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