



PLAY TO POWER:

The role of sports in advancing bodily autonomy and gender equality to prevent child, early, and forced marriage in Jharkhand



Foreword

According to the National Family Health Survey 2019-21 (NFHS-5), Twenty-five percent of women aged 18-29 marry before reaching the legal minimum age at marriage and about one-third of women marry before reaching the legal minimum age at marriage in Jharkhand which is 35%. Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM) continues to be a pressing issue in Jharkhand, where many girls still face societal and family pressure to marry at a very young age. In spite of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the practice of child marriage remains prevalent due to many factors including poverty, unemployment, financial restrictions, structural inequalities and social norms and the burden fall on the girl. These reasons limit their agency around their body and lives, isolating girls from their friends, family or their support system.

Agency and autonomy of girls has been neglected for ages. There are new amendments in the bill which is still in the standing committee. The Bill amends the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 to increase the minimum age of marriage of females to 21 years. Further, the Bill will override any other law, custom, or practice.

Over the years, many programme initiatives started to tackle the issue and work towards more equitable spaces for girls. This report highlights the same across rural and semi-urban areas of Jharkhand, and documents how sports-based interventions are becoming an important gateway to practice choice, freedom and claim their spaces. The report brings the on-ground insights from the practitioners who are implementing sports based interventions as well adolescents and young people who are at the receiving end of the implementation. It offers insights into the transformative potential of sport in advancing gender equality and protecting the rights of adolescents and fosters a sense of ownership and control over their bodies.

We hope this report serves not only as a resource for individuals, organisations, coaches, and community workers, stakeholders but also as a celebration of every young girl in Jharkhand who crossed the societal boundaries, kicked the ball and played, and reclaimed her right to choose her own path.

Acknowledgements

This report is a tribute to the collective effort of everyone involved especially the adolescents and young girls and women, community leaders, sports coaches in Jharkhand. We are deeply grateful for their trust and honesty in sharing their lived experiences: their struggles, wins and dreams- which form the foundation of this research and shared belief in empowering young people to realise and reclaim their agency.

We give our sincere gratitude to Madhumita Das who led this research in her guidance and mentorship along with Swati Shikha that has got us so far. We also would like to acknowledge the efforts made by Rinku during data collection and anchor the research throughout. We are also grateful for the support and guidance of Surbhi Kumar, Sonam Priya and Prabhleen Tuteja and we hope that this research does justice to the richness of the experience and the strategies that can work onground. This would have not been possible without the support and mentorship of Divya Mukand, Girls First Fund. A special acknowledgement and remembrance for Puja Roy, whom we all fondly remember for her unwavering support and visionary guidance to all the Girls First Fund partners in India. You are dearly missed.

Thank you, Ubitha Leela Unni and Nidhi Arya for designing this report and adding the creative elements that have blended the narratives through their art and concepts. A special mention for Sandhya for giving us the translation in Hindi of this report. It enabled us to take it to those whose stories have been given life through this report.

Last but not least, our heartfelt gratitude to the partner organisations¹ who continue to work at the grassroots, many times with the scarcity of resources and uncertainty, to support young girls in reclaiming their agency and autonomy through sports. We are thankful to every team member who brought their passion, experiences, individuality, knowledge into every part of this process from design and facilitation to writing and illustration.

¹ Partner Organisations: Ashray, Jharkhand Gramin Vikas Trust (JGVT), Prerana Bharati, JABALA Action Research, Jharkhand Vikas Parishad (JVP), RASTA, Srijan Mahila Vikas Manch (SMVM), Sahyogini, Ayo Aidari Trust, Adithi and the entire Jharkhand Community

About The YP Foundation

The YP Foundation (TYPF) is a youth-led and youth focused organisation that facilitates young people's feminist and rights-based leadership on issues of health equity, gender justice, sexuality rights, and social justice. TYPF ensures that young people have the information, capacity, and opportunities to inform and lead the development and implementation of programmes and policies that impact their lives and are recognised as skilled and aware leaders of social change.

About Butterfly Programme

The Butterfly Programme seeks to demonstrate adolescent girls as leaders at the forefront of their community for change and leadership building. The vision of the programme is to empower young girls to overcome the barriers that keep them from reaching their potential through joint action and support for feminist leadership. The overarching outcome that the programme seeks to achieve is to empower girls to become decision-makers on issues that are critical to their lives, and to influence the ecosystem(s) to recognise and enable their leadership journeys. The programme design is informed by the lived experiences of adolescent girls and young women, and the need to build capacities that enable us to speak against restrictions on our rights, confronting gender-based violence and improving mobility and public safety in schools and communities.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research investigates the role of sports programs in preventing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM) among adolescent girls in Jharkhand, India. CEFM is a violation of human rights driven by poverty, gender inequality, and harmful social norms. Sports programs, traditionally seen as recreational, are increasingly recognized as powerful tools for social change. These programs, which combine physical activity with life skills education, mentorship, and training on gender equality, have shown potential in enhancing girls' self-esteem, bodily autonomy, and leadership skills. They also offer safe spaces for girls to build networks, access information, and challenge gender norms. In Jharkhand, where girls face societal expectations that limit their futures, sports programs can open pathways to empowerment and self-determination.

The research utilized a feminist grounded approach, including workshops, focus group discussions, and interviews with various stakeholders. The study found that sports programs can challenge gender norms, build resilience and assertiveness, and promote bodily autonomy. Engaging in sports enhances body awareness and confidence, serving as a vehicle for social change by creating safe spaces, providing role models, and broadening social networks.



Challenges faced by NGOs include socio-cultural impediments, financial limitations, and logistical hurdles. Key challenges to addressing bodily autonomy and CEFM within these programs include inconsistent engagement, unclear integration of related conversations, resistance from traditional norms, and the need for community support and collaboration. Recommendations include embedding discussions on bodily autonomy within sports sessions, strengthening coach capacities, explicitly addressing consent and violation, linking sports with broader life goals, supporting long-term community ownership, prioritizing inclusion and language sensitivity, being conscious of contextual realities, and integrating monitoring and adaptation.

Creating safe spaces, fostering leadership and ownership among girls, and using sports as a medium for life skills and SRHR education are also crucial. In conclusion, the findings of this research strongly suggest that strategically integrating sports into broader empowerment programs represents a highly promising and effective strategy for the critical prevention of Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and the advancement of gender equality among adolescent girls in Jharkhand.

By addressing the multifaceted drivers of CEFM through a holistic approach that combines physical activity, life skills development, and gender equality education within safe and supportive environments, sports programs can play a vital role in transforming the lives of girls, empowering them to realize their full potential, and fostering a more just and equitable society. Continued investment, thoughtful implementation, and ongoing evaluation of these programs are essential to maximize their impact and ensure a brighter future for girls in Jharkhand. Overall, integrating sports into empowerment programs is a promising strategy for preventing CEFM and advancing gender equality in Jharkhand.



INTRODUCTION

CEFM remains a pervasive violation of human rights, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries (UNICEF, 2025; UNFPA, 2025, Girls Not Bride, 2025; WHP, 2020). Driven by poverty, gender inequality, harmful social norms, and limited access to education, CEFM curtails girls' potential and increases their vulnerability to violence, mobility, education, poor health outcomes, and economic dependency. In recent years, innovative strategies have emerged to tackle this deeply rooted issue, notably the integration of sports-based programs to empower girls and transform community norms. Sport, traditionally viewed as a recreational activity, is increasingly being leveraged as a powerful vehicle for social change. Programs incorporating physical activity with life skills education, mentorship, and gender equality training have shown some promising results in enhancing girls' self esteem, bodily autonomy, and leadership abilities.

These qualities are critical in enabling girls to make informed decisions about their futures and resist pressures to marry early, negotiate for opportunities, and continue their education. Moreover, such initiatives often serve as safe spaces where girls can build peer networks, access information about their rights, and challenge restrictive gender norms within their communities. In Jharkhand's context, where societal expectations often limit girls' futures, sports can open new pathways toward empowerment, education, and self-determination. The deeply rooted gender and social inequality driven by existing poverty and social norms, girls are often victims or survivors of early and forced marriage that deprives them of their rights and opportunities. Innovative interventions are crucial to challenge these longstanding practices.

Sports programs that emphasize bodily autonomy and gender equality offer a powerful tool for change. By building girls' confidence, shifting community perceptions, and fostering leadership, such programs can play a critical role in preventing early marriage. This review explores the body of evidence linking sports with gender integrated empowerment programs addressing CEFM prevention in Jharkhand. It highlights the mechanisms through which these programs operate and addresses diverse discourse around girls' body autonomy and rights, and offers insights into the transformative potential of sport in advancing gender equality and protecting the rights of adolescent girls.



THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

How can sports programs that challenge gender norms and stereotypes and promote bodily autonomy and gender equality contribute to the prevention of CEFM among adolescent girls in Jharkhand?

The Key Research Questions

How have been the current initiatives and approaches in engaging adolescent girls in sports to foster physical and personal autonomy, build confidence, and challenge traditional gender norms that perpetuate CEFM in Jharkhand?

How gender and social norms restrict girls' agency and rights and how are these norms being challenged by girls? How can participation in sports help girls assert control over their bodies and make decisions about their futures, including their rights to education and marriage? What does the evidence show?



METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

This research study adopted a feminist grounded approach to understand the role of sports programs promoting bodily autonomy and gender equality in preventing CEFM among adolescent girls in Jharkhand. The methodology included the following key components:

Data Gathering

A combination of qualitative and secondary review was utilized to gather comprehensive insights. Multiple stakeholder perspectives were captured to ensure a nuanced understanding of the issue.

Secondary Review of Existing Programs Interventions in Jharkhand

A desk review was conducted to analyze existing sports-based programs and interventions in Jharkhand that aim to empower girls and address gender inequalities. This review helped identify best practices, gaps, and lessons learned.

Workshop (Adolescent Girls and Young Women)

A two day workshop was held with 33 adolescent girls and 22 young women participating in sports programs. The sessions were planned to explore their experiences with bodily autonomy, gender norms, aspirations, and perceptions of marriage in relation to their participation in sports programs.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (Program Organizations: GFF-TYPF Partners)

TYPF conducted FGDs with representatives of program organizations, particularly partners supported by the Girls First Fund (GFF). The team reached out to 9 partner organizations during February, March and April 2025 to conduct the discussion. The participants include the Head of the organization, Program lead, facilitators as well as Community leaders. Discussions focused on program design, implementation strategies, and perceived impact on delaying marriage.

Key Informant Interviews (Coaches)

In-depth interviews were conducted with six (6) sports coaches involved in implementing empowerment programs. Interviews captured insights into the role of coaching in promoting self confidence, bodily autonomy, and challenging traditional gender roles among girls.

Key Informant Interviews (Civil Society Organizations - CSOs)

Interviews were also held with leaders from three (3) leading organizations and their field program staff actively working on gender rights and child marriage prevention. Their experiences provided context on broader community engagement and advocacy strategies.



THE LANDSCAPE

CEFM remains a critical human rights concern in India, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls. Rooted in structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic pressures, CEFM limits girls' access to education, health, and autonomy. While legislative reforms (the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009) and education-based interventions have seen some success, sports-based programs have emerged as innovative tools for empowerment. These initiatives, grounded in the principles of bodily autonomy and gender equality, have the potential to shift deep-rooted social norms and delay or prevent marriage among adolescent girls. These initiatives often incorporate elements of bodily autonomy, empowerment, and gender equality, which can influence girls' life trajectories, self-perception, and societal roles.

India is home to approximately one-third of the world's child brides, with nearly 23% of women aged 20–24 married before age 18 (UNICEF, 2021). The drivers of CEFM include entrenched gender norms, poverty, lack of education, and limited access to reproductive health services (Girls Not Brides, 2020). The practice often leads to early pregnancy, domestic violence, restricted mobility, and the termination of educational opportunities, perpetuating cycles of gender inequality and poverty. India's position as home to roughly one-third of the world's child brides presents a significant challenge to the well-being and rights of girls. Recent data from UNICEF in 2021 indicates that nearly 23% of women in the 20–24 age group were married before reaching the legal age of 18.

This deeply entrenched practice of CEFM is fueled by a complex interplay of socio-economic and cultural factors. Poverty creates vulnerabilities, compelling families to view marriage as a means of securing their daughters' futures or alleviating financial burdens, often exacerbated by the perceived lower dowry demands for younger brides. The lack of access to quality education, particularly for girls, further perpetuates the cycle, as education empowers girls with knowledge, skills, and opportunities that can delay marriage and improve their life prospects. Entrenched gender norms play a crucial role in sustaining CEFM, with societal expectations often prioritizing a girl's marriage over her education and autonomy. These norms can dictate a lower social status for unmarried adult women and place pressure on

families to marry off their daughters at a young age to protect family honor or avoid perceived risks. Furthermore, limited access to comprehensive reproductive health services leaves young married girls vulnerable to early pregnancy and its associated health risks, including higher rates of maternal and infant mortality. The lack of awareness about their rights and available support systems further compounds their challenges.

The consequences of CEFM are far-reaching and devastating for the girls involved and for society as a whole. Early pregnancy poses significant health risks due to their physical immaturity, increasing the likelihood of complications during childbirth and adverse health outcomes for both the mother and the child. Child brides are also disproportionately vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse within the marital relationship, often lacking the agency and support networks to escape such situations. Their mobility and freedom are often severely restricted, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and social participation. The termination of their educational opportunities not only deprives them of personal growth and development but also hinders their future economic prospects, perpetuating cycles of gender inequality and poverty across generations. Addressing this complex issue requires a multi-faceted approach involving legislative reforms, stricter enforcement of existing laws, economic empowerment programs for girls and their families, initiatives to challenge harmful gender norms, and improved access to education and reproductive health services.





Challenging Gendered Norms

In numerous regions across India, deeply entrenched societal norms impose significant restrictions on girls' freedom of movement and their autonomy over their own bodies. These norms frequently confine their identities and aspirations primarily to the domains of marriage and domestic responsibilities, limiting their horizons and potential. Participation in sports programs offers a compelling and empowering alternative narrative, one that celebrates their physical prowess, athleticism, and inner strength. This engagement directly confronts the traditional and often restrictive norms that have historically curtailed girls' opportunities for personal growth and development. By showcasing their capabilities in a public and competitive sphere, sports can contribute to a profound and gradual shift in community perceptions regarding the multifaceted roles and potential of girls and women, extending far beyond the conventional expectations associated with marriage and household duties. The burgeoning visibility of female athletes in India, despite the persistent challenges they continue to encounter, acts as a potent and inspiring counter narrative to these limiting stereotypes, demonstrating what girls and women can achieve with opportunity and dedication.

Building Resilience and Assertiveness

The inherently competitive nature of sports, coupled with the essential requirement for effective teamwork, plays a vital role in fostering resilience, perseverance, and the crucial ability for girls to be assertive in the pursuit of their goals and in advocating for their own needs.

and rights. These skills are not confined to the playing field; they are profoundly important in empowering girls to resist various forms of coercion, including pressure related to early or forced marriage, and to confidently negotiate their futures on their own terms, making informed decisions about their education, career, and personal lives. The dynamics of team sports necessitate clear and effective communication, as well as the ability to confidently articulate and defend one's position within a group. These experiences translate directly into greater self assurance and assertiveness in various aspects of personal life, enabling girls to navigate social interactions, express their opinions, and stand up for themselves with greater confidence and conviction.

Bodily Autonomy and Gender Equality

Bodily autonomy, as defined by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020), denotes the capacity and agency to make independent decisions concerning one's physical person. In circumstances where adolescent girls lack autonomy, decisions regarding marriage, sexual activity, and reproductive health are frequently determined by other parties. Gender equality, which advocates for equitable rights and opportunities across all genders, is imperative for cultivating environments in which adolescent girls can exercise such autonomy.

Empowerment initiatives that integrate education, awareness campaigns, and social support mechanisms are crucial in contesting norms that condone or legitimize CEFM.

Bodily autonomy, as defined by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020), represents the fundamental right of every individual, particularly adolescent girls, to possess the capacity and agency to make informed and uncoerced decisions concerning their physical person, health, and well-being. This encompasses a wide spectrum of personal choices, including decisions about their bodies, their health care, their sexuality, and their reproduction, free from violence, coercion, or discrimination. When adolescent girls lack



this foundational autonomy, critical life decisions pertaining to marriage, initiation of sexual activity, and access to reproductive health services are often dictated by parents, family members, community leaders, or societal pressures, effectively stripping girls of their agency and control over their own lives and futures.

Achieving comprehensive gender equality, which unequivocally advocates for the equitable rights, opportunities, and treatment of individuals across all gender identities, is absolutely imperative for cultivating supportive and empowering environments wherein adolescent girls can fully exercise their bodily autonomy. Gender inequality perpetuates harmful social norms and power imbalances that often lead to the denial of girls' rights and their subjugation to patriarchal control. By challenging discriminatory practices and promoting equal access to resources and opportunities, societies can foster a context where girls are valued, their voices are heard, and their right to self determination is respected.

To effectively empower adolescent girls and enable them to claim their bodily autonomy, multifaceted and comprehensive initiatives are essential. These empowerment initiatives must strategically integrate crucial elements such as accessible and quality education, which equips girls with knowledge, critical thinking skills, and awareness of their rights; targeted awareness campaigns that challenge harmful gender stereotypes, promote gender equality, and educate communities about the importance of girls' autonomy; and robust social support mechanisms that provide girls with safe spaces, mentorship, access to essential services, and platforms to collectively advocate for their rights. Furthermore, such initiatives play a vital role in actively contesting deeply entrenched social and cultural norms that condone, normalize, or even legitimize harmful practices such as CEFM, thereby creating a protective environment where girls can thrive and exercise their fundamental right to bodily autonomy. Addressing the root causes of gender inequality and empowering girls with the necessary tools and support are critical steps towards ensuring their health, well-being, and the realization of their full potential.

Body Awareness and Confidence

Engagement in athletic activities offers a multifaceted array of benefits that extend beyond mere physical fitness for adolescent girls, significantly shaping their understanding of their physical selves and their inherent capabilities. This active participation serves as a power and appreciate their physical potential. Through the challenges and triumphs experienced in sports, these young women gain a tangible understanding of their strength, agility, and endurance, leading to a more profound and positive body image.

This enhanced awareness of their physical prowess directly contributes to an augmentation of self confidence. As they master new skills, achieve fitness goals, and overcome athletic obstacles, their belief in their abilities expands beyond the realm of sports, permeating other aspects of their lives. This burgeoning self-assurance is further reinforced by an intensified sense of self-efficacy – the conviction in their capacity to succeed in specific situations or accomplish tasks. This belief in their agency empowers them to navigate the complexities of adolescence with greater resilience and a stronger sense of control over their lives.

The development of self-confidence and self-efficacy has profound implications for their health and welfare, equipping them with the psychological fortitude to make judicious decisions. Empowered by a strong sense of self-worth and the belief in their ability to shape their future, they are betterpositioned to resist societal pressures that may compromise their well-being, including resistance to pressures toward premature marriage. When girls possess a strong sense of self and a belief in their potential, they are more likely to prioritize their education, health, and personal development over societal expectations that may limit their opportunities.

Consider, for instance, the impact of instruction in self-defense through martial arts programs. These programs not only impart practical physical skills but also cultivate a profound sense of both physical and psychological fortitude. By learning to defend themselves, girls develop a tangible awareness of their physical strength and the ability to protect themselves, which significantly bolsters their self confidence. Furthermore,

the discipline and mental focus required in martial arts training instill a sense of mental resilience and self-control, contributing to an enhanced sense of self-efficacy that extends far beyond self-defense situations. This newfound sense of empowerment can be instrumental in resisting pressures and making informed decisions about their lives and futures.

Sports as a Vehicle for Social Change

Globally, sports have been recognized as a transformative tool for addressing social and gender inequalities. Sports build self-confidence, enhance communication skills, promote leadership, and challenge traditional gender roles (Brady, 2005). The Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) movement highlights how physical activity can foster inclusion, especially for girls in conservative or resource-poor communities (UNDP, 2018). In such environments, sports can become safe spaces for learning, dialogue, and personal growth.

Creating Safe Spaces and Peer Support: Sports programs can establish safe and inclusive environments where girls can interact, build friendships, and receive mentorship from coaches and older athletes. These spaces can become crucial platforms for discussing gender-related issues, sharing experiences, and collectively challenging harmful practices like CEFM. All-girls sports teams can provide a supportive environment free from traditional gender biases often found in mixed gender settings.

Providing Positive Role Models



Female athletes and coaches who have overcome societal barriers in India can serve as powerful role models, inspiring girls to pursue their education and careers and challenging the notion that early marriage is the only viable option. Their success stories, even at the local level, can demonstrate alternative paths and aspirations. The stories of Indian female athletes who have excelled in national and international competitions can be particularly impactful.

Enhancing Social Capital and Networks

Participation in sports can broaden girls' social networks, connecting them with individuals and organizations that advocate for their rights and can provide support against CEFM. These networks can offer access to information, resources, and potential allies within their communities and beyond. NGOs working on girls' empowerment often use sports as a tool to build these crucial networks. **Raising Awareness and Challenging Social Norms:** Sports events and programs can be utilized as platforms to raise community awareness about the negative consequences of CEFM and promote gender equality. Engaging boys and men in these initiatives is vital for fostering a supportive environment that values girls' rights and agency. Street plays or community sports events can incorporate messages about gender equality and the importance of delaying marriage. **Delaying Marriage and Expanding Opportunities:** By offering girls engaging and meaningful alternatives, sports programs can contribute to delaying marriage. As girls invest time and energy in sports, their focus may shift towards education, skill development, and personal achievements, making early marriage less appealing. Combining sports with educational or vocational training can provide a holistic approach to empowering girls.

In India, a number of non-governmental organizations are leveraging the power of sports to address critical social issues affecting girls, particularly child marriage. Organizations such as the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) have supported and studied the impact of sports interventions. The Naz Foundation, known for its work on sexual health and rights, also incorporates sports into its programs to empower adolescent girls. Magic Bus utilizes a sports-based curriculum to foster life skills and educational attainment, indirectly contributing to delayed marriage. Similarly, Pro Sport Development focuses on using sports for holistic development, including empowering girls and promoting gender equality, which can influence decisions around marriage. These organizations recognize that sports provide a platform for girls to develop leadership skills, build confidence, enhance their social networks, and gain a sense of agency, all of which are crucial in challenging traditional norms and delaying marriage.

Bodily Autonomy Through Sports

Empowering Girls and Delaying Early Marriage Bodily autonomy, the fundamental right of individuals to make their own decisions concerning their bodies and health without coercion or violence, stands as a cornerstone of personal empowerment and gender equality. Research increasingly highlights the profound impact of girls' participation in structured sports programs on the development of this crucial sense of self-determination. Notably, a comprehensive study by UNFPA in 2021 demonstrated a strong correlation between girls' involvement in sports and an enhanced sense of agency and control over their lives. This newfound autonomy plays a vital role in equipping girls with the confidence and resilience necessary to resist societal pressures, including the harmful practice of early marriage.

The connection between sports participation and bodily autonomy is multifaceted. Firstly, sports provide a space for girls to develop physical competence and a positive body image. Through training, competition, and teamwork, girls become more aware of their physical capabilities and learn to value their bodies for their strength and resilience rather than solely for their appearance. This embodied experience fosters a sense of ownership and control over their physical selves, laying the foundation for broader assertions of autonomy in other areas of their lives. Secondly, structured sports programs often incorporate elements of leadership development, teamwork, and strategic thinking. As girls take on roles within their teams, make decisions under pressure, and collaborate towards common goals, they develop crucial life skills that translate into greater agency off the field. They learn to assert their opinions, negotiate with others, and advocate for their needs, all of which are essential for exercising bodily autonomy in the face of potentially coercive situations, such as pressure to marry early.

EXAMPLES OF INTERVENTIONS



Organizations like **Girls Not Brides** work with member organizations in India to use sports participation as a tool to shift gender norms and prevent child marriage. They highlight how sports builds team spirit, relationships, and open communication among girls, enabling them to support each other against early marriage.



India Khelo Football emphasizes how football empowers girls by developing physical and mental strength, teamwork, leadership skills, and self-confidence, helping them break societal barriers.



Maitrayana's Young People's Initiative (YPI) uses netball and life skills training to empower adolescent girls and young women, providing safe spaces and building their leadership. The program has reached over 130,000 participants and challenges gender stereotypes by encouraging girls' presence in public playgrounds.



Centre for Social Research (CSR, India) has implemented “Sports for Empowering Girls” programs in Haryana, focusing on building confidence and increasing the perceived value of girls through sports, ultimately aiming to increase female enrollment in education and delay marriage.



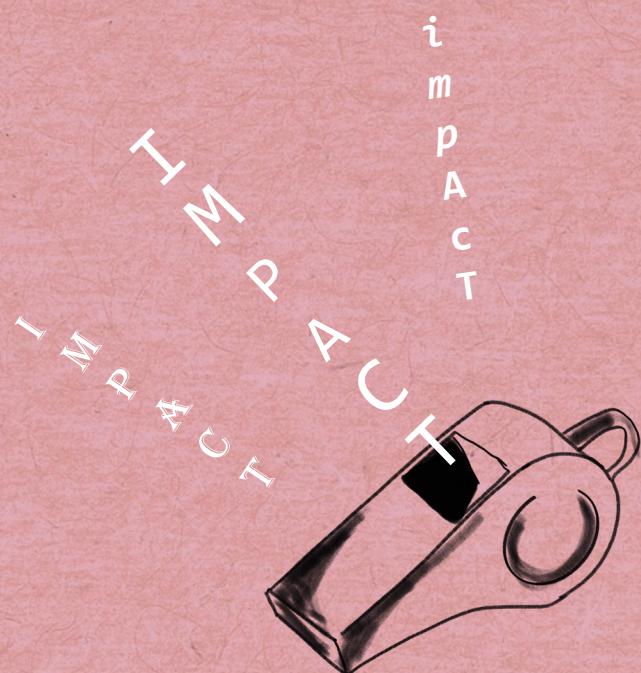
The Naz Foundation’s Girl Out Loud (GOAL) program empowers adolescent girls in urban slums by integrating netball with life skills education. Participants report increased self confidence and a greater willingness to oppose harmful practices like forced marriage. The program’s combination of physical activity and empowering education fosters resilience and agency, enabling girls to become agents of change. Further research could explore the long term impacts of this approach to girls’ empowerment.

Furthermore, participation in sports can create supportive social networks for girls. Team environments provide opportunities for girls to connect with peers and adult mentors who can serve as sources of encouragement, information, and support. These relationships can empower girls to challenge traditional norms and make informed decisions about their futures, including decisions related to marriage and family planning. The shared experience of overcoming challenges in sports can build solidarity and collective agency among girls, strengthening their ability to resist harmful practices. The UNFPA study’s findings underscore the critical role of structured sports programs as a protective factor against early marriage. By fostering bodily autonomy, these programs empower girls

to make informed choices about their education, health, and well-being, including when and whom to marry. Investing in and promoting girls' participation in sports is therefore not only beneficial for their physical and mental health but also a crucial strategy in the broader effort to end child marriage and advance gender equality. Creating accessible and inclusive sports opportunities for girls in all communities can contribute significantly to their empowerment and their ability to lead lives of their choosing.

Impact of sports based program on CEFM Prevention

While there isn't one specific, large-scale "India sports program" solely focused on CEFM prevention, the impact of integrating sports into programs aimed at empowering girls and delaying early marriage in India is increasingly recognized and demonstrated by various initiatives. Sports act as a powerful tool by addressing several underlying factors that contribute to CEFM. Sports participation fosters a sense of ownership and control over their bodies. As girls become physically stronger and more aware, their confidence grows, contributing to greater autonomy in decision-making, including those related to marriage.



EXAMPLES OF INTERVENTIONS



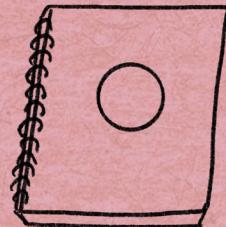
Naandi Foundation's "Sports for Life" Program This program reaches over 130,000 underprivileged girls across India, using a multi-sports curriculum to develop life skills, teamwork, and leadership. While not explicitly focused solely on CEFM, empowering girls through sports and education is a key outcome that indirectly contributes to delaying marriage. The program also emphasizes women as "sports allies" and leaders, providing role models.



Praajak's Kabaddi Group Work Project (West Bengal) This initiative integrates Kabaddi with socio-emotional learning to empower adolescent girls and prevent violence against women, including child marriage. The program builds awareness, knowledge, skills, and confidence among participants. Testimonies suggest intergenerational impacts on families and communities.



Parivartan for Girls (ICRW) This Mumbai-based program used sports with adolescent girls to increase their self-esteem, self-confidence, and educational aspirations, while addressing norms against women's use of public space. The evaluation demonstrated shifts in norms related to girls' mobility and education, factors linked to delayed marriage.



Khel Ek Seekh (Pro Sport Development & Girls Not Brides)

This handbook provides sports based games and activities for facilitators to initiate dialogues on gender with adolescents and youth. It aims to build leadership, communication, and teamwork while advancing gender equality, which is crucial in preventing CEFM.

A 2017 evaluation of programs in Bihar and Jharkhand (Girls Not Brides & CREA) reported that girls involved in empowerment and sports activities had significantly lower rates of early marriage than those not involved. In many communities, girls' mobility and access to public spaces are restricted, increasing their vulnerability. Sports programs provide safe spaces for girls to be physically active, interact with peers, and become visible, challenging traditional norms. Sports inherently teach valuable life skills such as teamwork, communication, leadership, resilience, and strategic thinking. These skills equip girls with greater agency and the ability to navigate social pressures, including those related to early marriage.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

THE BUTTERFLY INITIATIVE:

Unpacking the benefits of how
sports enhances girls' agency and empowerment



Participation in sports offers a wealth of benefits that contribute significantly to girls' overall well being, encompassing psychological, social, and physical dimensions. Thematic analysis of the transcripts revealed the existing gender norms and stereotypes, and restrictions that these girls and the program organizations had to manoeuvre. A multiple interconnected themes and sub-themes that collectively illuminate how sports-based interventions in Jharkhand are enabling adolescent girls to challenge traditional gender norms, build autonomy, and resist CEFM have also emerged during the discussion. These themes reflect transformations at individual, familial, and community levels, as well as the role of institutional strategies and constraints in shaping these changes.

EXISTING GENDER NORMS AND STEREOTYPES RESTRICTING GIRLS PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

Time Poverty, Care Responsibilities, and Gendered Double Burden in Sports This sub-theme explores the compounded time and labor expectations placed on girls and women in sports, particularly those from marginalised or rural communities. Participants revealed how girls and women constantly navigate a double burden—juggling sports training with extensive domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and care giving responsibilities. These expectations are deeply gendered, reflecting entrenched societal norms where household labor is seen as inherently female and rarely redistributed or valued.



Wraps house hold chores
before football practice in
the evening.



!



Time poverty emerged as a structural constraint—where girls must wake early to complete chores or care for younger siblings or children before they take out time to attend session and sports training. This burden not only impacts the ability to train or participate fully in sports but also perpetuates a hierarchy where women must “earn” their right to pursue sport by fulfilling traditional roles first. Sports earnings promoted financial independence in the family, but they also requested financial support from her. Balancing sports with personal life proved challenging girls and women to achieve success. Societal support generally comes after sports and particularly with success and achievements. Despite this, participants also saw sport as a site for potential transformation, choosing it as a path to personal identity, dreams, and leadership, albeit with constant negotiation against normative timelines and expectations.

Conditional Support and Performance-Linked Validation

The group discussion also draws attention to how recognition, acceptance, and support for female athletes are often contingent on demonstrable success and accolades. Participants described a social environment where support from families, communities, and institutions only materializes after a girl “proves her worth” through performance, typically through winning medals, gaining visibility, or earning money through sports. Before achieving such recognition, girls are met with skepticism, discouragement, and even active resistance. They are told to prioritize marriage, household responsibilities, or financial contributions over sport.



Jharkhand Gramin Vikas Trust (JGVT)

"It took us about a year's time to mobilise the community, and form the first couple of groups of adolescent girls interested in playing. When we rolled out the program on the ground, after their first football practice match ever, brothers of many girls raised more questions and objections than their parents. Boys challenged their sisters' decision. Girls were questioned by their brothers on accounts of how they went to play? Why did they go? Why did they play?. Saddened but not deterred, girls continue to practice and play football."

"After the girls came home victorious in one of their initial matches with another team, the same brothers who stood opposed to their sisters playing started to support them. They acknowledged their sisters' potential. This support also sprouted in households where girls had not won. Brothers and fathers started working on creating space for girls to play. They cleared a field for the girls and made a ground out of it for them to practice."

"More girls have started to participate in sports programs and matches, and bring the trophy home. Additionally, viewership during girls' sports tournaments has also been increasing."

- (Organization team and community Mobilizer, JGVT)

Institutional support, in the form of training resources, coaches, or public encouragement, also hinges on perceived future returns that are often tied to gendered expectations of honour and pride for the community. This conditionality not only undermines the intrinsic value of participation in sports for girls but also creates pressure to constantly perform, commodifying their engagement.

Success becomes transactional, legitimizing their dreams only if it aligns with community pride or financial return. This reflects broader patriarchal ideologies where female agency is celebrated only when it conforms to collective expectations.

Restrict Access, Mobility, and Space for Girls

This sub-theme reflects the structural and social barriers adolescent girls face in accessing physical spaces, mobility, and opportunities essential for sport participation. These constraints, rooted in gendered expectations, familial control, and safety concerns, directly impact girls' ability to pursue sports consistently or professionally. Participants shared how the simple act of finding a safe and accessible ground to play is a daily struggle—"jagah nahi milti" (we don't get space). Both social norms and logistical barriers often restrict mobility, girls are not allowed to travel outside their village or city, especially alone, and face scrutiny when attempting to do so. Concerns over safety, injury, and reputational damage are often used to justify these restrictions.

Myths and taboo around menstruation further curtails access, with cultural taboos leading to bans on participation during periods. Infrastructural limitations, like the presence of rangdaars (local strongmen), control and intimidate girls attempting to use community spaces. "Girls are usually not allowed to play during menstruations... do not get a healthy meal every day." Even when girls express interest, a lack of teams or coaches, especially for sports other than football, prevents them from playing in those days.

These limitations are not just physical but psychological, creating a landscape where sport is a privilege rather than a right. Yet, despite these hurdles, girls persist in negotiating with families, balancing domestic responsibilities, and challenging social codes to carve out time and space for sport.



Intersectional Barriers

Caste, Religion, and Socio-Economic Status: While exploring how caste, religion, and socio-economic factors intersect to shape the experiences of girls in accessing sports and public life, we found many participants were not very comfortable talking about it, especially in the context of their own community and village. Girls from religious minorities (particularly Muslim communities), marginalized castes, or economically vulnerable households faced heightened scrutiny, limited mobility, and stricter norms around clothing and behaviour.

"For Muslim Kishoris, it was difficult... They are not allowed to wear shorts (chota kapda)... We asked them to wear trousers, and now they play at district level."

Recent socio-political issues have reinforced hyperfixation on female-bodied adolescents, especially from religious minorities in the area. Historical social structures and biases initially impacted group dynamics, but collaborative efforts are now underway, and shifts in behavior are observed. Contemporary socio-political challenges have intensified focus on adolescent females from religious minority communities.

In many instances, resistance was more intense due to community expectations around honour, propriety, and marriageability. Despite these constraints, targeted efforts by the organizations, such as adapting sportswear, engaging local leaders, and creating inclusive teams, enabled gradual breakthroughs. Sports thus became a platform for cross-caste interactions and building new solidarities.



Her family suggested that
she should support herself
financially by using the money
she gets/wins from sports.



Support only comes after
the achievements under her
wings, only then her mettle
is proven (conditionally).

She cannot travel to
other cities/villages.
Families do not feel
safe for girls to go
around without them.
Often parents do not
provide permission
from playing outside
the village.



Gendered constraints lead to resistance and the reimagining of identity

The above data highlights the gendered challenges adolescent and young adult Adivasi sports women face in their pursuit of playing outdoors, alongside their active resistance and reimagining of selfhood and identity through sport. These young women encounter intersecting structural, social, and cultural constraints—ranging from mobility restrictions, attire policing, food insecurity, and domestic responsibilities, to restrictive heteronormative beliefs and surveillance of their bodies. In imagining female sport persons, participants often framed them in contrast to normative femininity, portraying them with masculine traits (e.g., short hair, functional clothing) to legitimize their participation in a space traditionally considered male. This aesthetic shift was not only linked to athletic practicality but also to sociocultural pressures to embody toughness and resist sexual vulnerability. Girls reported being denied opportunities due to fears of injury, damage to marriageability, and social stigma. Expectations that women be caregivers and homemakers persist, even as they excel on the field. The balancing act of pursuing sport while fulfilling domestic chores reflects this paradox. Institutional reinforcement—from family norms to government policies and media imagery—further reproduces these binaries, making it difficult for girls to imagine alternate realities where femininity and athleticism co-exist.

Participants also highlighted the restrictive norms around dress, behaviour, and physical expression, such as not being allowed to run, jump, or wear shorts, often linked to fears about the male gaze, safety, and marriageability. Despite these constraints, girls actively chose football, a sport perceived as masculine and male-dominated, as a deliberate act of defiance. They embraced it to assert autonomy over their bodies, challenge male privilege in public spaces, and redefine what it means to be “a girl” in their settings.

While acknowledging the depth of these norms, participants advocated for more inclusive portrayals of femininity, allowing girls to exist outside binary constraints and be celebrated irrespective of appearance or conformity to societal expectations.

ANALYSIS OF PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS IN CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS AND STEREOTYPES



Despite the challenges, girls assert autonomy by choosing football, a sport traditionally viewed as male-dominated, to challenge gender roles, establish personal identities, and carve out public presence in deeply patriarchal settings. The evidence also shows the moments of resistance and reimagining among girls. Participants of the sports-based interventions among the partner organizations during the sessions questioned who decides what is “appropriate,” expressing awareness of how media, government institutions, and inherited patriarchal scripts reinforce rigid gender binaries, which restrict and frame girls entering sports.

Sports as a Pathway to Autonomy and Confidence

The analysis highlights how participation in sports provided adolescent girls with a powerful avenue to build self-confidence, assert autonomy, and develop a stronger sense of identity. Through regular involvement in sports-based activities, girls reported increased physical mobility, greater body confidence, and improved communication skills. For many, sports became a transformative space where they could challenge internalized beliefs about gender roles, develop leadership capacities, and reimagine their futures beyond traditional expectations, such as early marriage. The structured and supportive environment of sports also enabled girls to safely explore their capabilities, make decisions, and take initiative both on and off the field.

Strategy to Challenge Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM)

We also explore how sports were strategically used as a culturally acceptable and non confrontational entry point to address the sensitive and often taboo topic of CEFM. Program implementers deliberately framed sports as a means of physical and personal development, allowing girls to step outside their homes and engage in public spaces. By building trust with families and communities through gradual exposure to sports, the program created space to introduce conversations on sexual and reproductive health, bodily autonomy, and ultimately, CEFM. The indirect approach avoided conflict with conservative community norms while empowering girls to delay or negotiate marriage decisions.

Jharkhand Vikas Parishad (JVP)

"Marriage of a standard 10th girl, also playing under our sports for development (S4D) program, was arranged by her family. All preparations for the marriage were done by the family. When we learned about the marriage, we immediately decided to intervene. We spoke with the girl as well as with her father", organisation team (JVP). After engaging with the father, the wedding was called off. "The girl recently completed her intermediate level of education," Community Mobilizer (JVP).

Football emerges not only as a passion but a form of symbolic resistance, enabling girls and young women to push back against norms of early marriage and sexualisation and control over their bodies. Many participants highlighted how support from family or society is conditional and often contingent on proven success or accolades, rather than inherent belief in girls' potential.

Negotiating Mobility and Challenging Spatial Restrictions

The finding delves into how girls involved in the sports-for-development (S4D) programs began to negotiate increased freedom of movement and challenge restrictive norms around their mobility. Initially, participants described strong family and community resistance to girls' presence in public spaces, including conditions such as finishing household chores or facing surveillance by boys and elders. Over time, however, the structured engagement through sports provided girls with a legitimate reason to step outside, travel to other villages, and claim previously male-dominated spaces like playgrounds and stadiums. These shifts not only allowed girls to access physical spaces but also contributed to transforming the community's perceptions of girls' rights to move, participate, and lead.

Community Engagement and Shifting Gender Norms

The research study also explores the critical role of community engagement in shifting long-standing gender norms around girls' participation in sports, public life, and decision-making. The programs strategically involved mothers, fathers, brothers, panchayat members, and other stakeholders to build a supportive environment. As more girls participated and succeeded in sports, community attitudes began to evolve—from resistance to pride and support. Visible successes (e.g., winning matches, recognition from dignitaries, social media exposure) further legitimized girls' presence in public domains. The normalization of girls in sports settings challenged stereotypes around physicality, clothing, and leadership, contributing to broader acceptance of gender equality. Furthermore, societal perceptions of gender and sexuality, as expressed by participants, were rooted in rigid binaries, with discomfort around imagining non-heteronormative identities. Still, by engaging in sport, girls and young women, part of the intervention, navigate and destabilize these binaries, forging new meanings of agency, gender, and community participation.

Breaking Silence and Reclaiming Public Voice

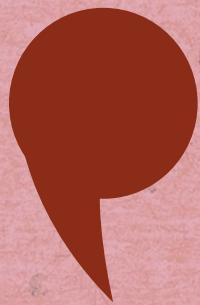
This theme captures the transformation of girls from silent observers in their communities to vocal participants who actively challenge gender stereotypes and claim public platforms. Through participation in sports and related programming, girls began to express their opinions more confidently, respond to community criticism, and assert their right to be seen and heard. This vocal presence in public spaces was radical, especially in contexts where girls were previously confined to domestic roles. Sports provided a powerful metaphor and platform for reclaiming their voices, reshaping narratives around gender, and inspiring others through visibility and performance.



SPORTS AS A CATALYST FOR PERSONAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

This theme encapsulates the transformative impact of sports on adolescent girls' personal development and their social interactions within the community. Participation in sports fostered essential life skills such as confidence, restraint, leadership, communication, and teamwork among girls reported by all program organizations. Over the years, sports have become a medium of expression. Girls who were unable to express themselves in words are now expressing their emotions and anger through the game.

Through structured activities and collective learning, girls gained physical fitness and developed resilience, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving abilities. Sports also created and fostered personal growth, social bonding, and life skills, empowering girls to navigate both individual and community challenges. Engaging in structured sports activities and collaborative learning environments significantly contributes to the holistic development of girls. These experiences not only enhance their physical fitness levels through regular exercise and skill-based training but also cultivate crucial psychological attributes. Resilience is fostered as girls learn to overcome setbacks, persevere through challenges, and bounce back from defeats in a supportive team setting. Emotional intelligence is nurtured through interactions with teammates and opponents, requiring them to understand and manage their own emotions while also recognizing and responding empathetically to the feelings of others. Problem-solving abilities are honed as they strategize during games, adapt to dynamic situations, and work together to find effective solutions. Beyond the immediate benefits, participation in sports creates a strong foundation for personal growth. The discipline and dedication required for training translate into improved self-confidence and a stronger sense of self-efficacy. The shared experiences of teamwork and competition foster deep social bonds, building camaraderie and a sense of belonging among participants. Furthermore, sports inherently teach valuable life skills such as communication, leadership, cooperation, time management, and goal setting. These skills extend far beyond the playing field, empowering girls to navigate a wide range of individual and community challenges with greater confidence and competence, ultimately contributing to their overall well-being and future success.



**After joining sports,
I learned to stand in
front of people and
speak. Earlier,
I was scared to even
introduce myself.**

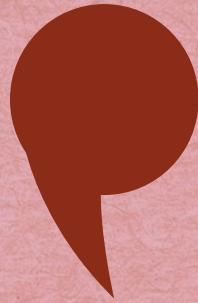
The regular conversation and practices equipped girls to learn how to deal with wins and losses. They have become emotionally stronger and are capable of dealing with the situations.

Additionally, sports facilitated a reconfiguration of traditional gender expectations, with girls actively engaging in public spaces, building networks, and emerging as role models within their communities.

These engagements often extended beyond the field into broader life contexts, enhancing girls' capacity to make informed decisions, lead peer groups, and engage constructively with institutions.



The field is now a space for expression, strength, and sisterhood. It's where we are taken seriously.



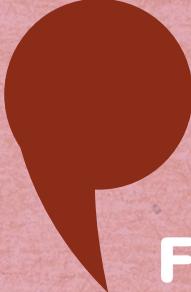
Sports made me a better speaker, taught me to communicate and coordinate. Earlier I was not able to interact with new people and seniors, but now I do.



**We play together,
win together, and even
when we lose, we handle it
as a team.**



**When we practice, we
discuss not just the game
but also life issues—
periods, school, and family
problems.**



**For Muslim kishoris, it
was very difficult... they
are not allowed to
wear shorts...**

**Society says that sports
increases the risk of
injury and marriage
prospects become
difficult.**



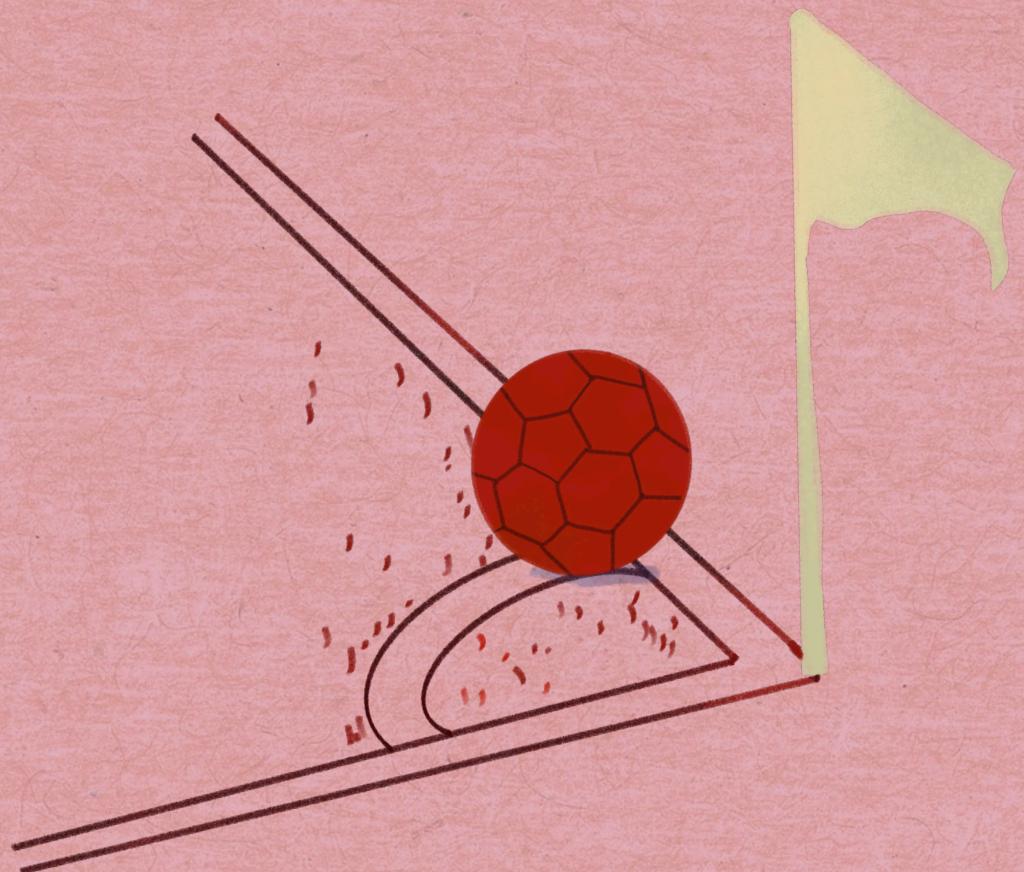
BODILY AUTONOMY CONSENT, AND BOUNDARIES



This theme explores the nuanced and often fraught relationship adolescent girls have with bodily autonomy, especially in the context of sports and physical activity. The findings reveal a pervasive lack of recognition and practice of consent, whether in physical contact, setting personal boundaries, or managing one's own body during menstruation, injury, or public gaze. The concept of consent was absent from consideration. There was no discussion, no explicit requests, and seemingly no implicit understanding or awareness of the need for mutual agreement before engaging in sport activities. This lack of attention to personal boundaries created a situation where individuals felt their autonomy was disregarded. While boundaries were acknowledged as existing, their definition and enforcement were unclear and inconsistent. This lack of clarity created ambiguity and made it difficult for individuals to navigate social interactions with a sense of security and predictability. Activities and discussions highlighted how everyday interactions, from handshakes to physical jostling in sport, often occur without consideration for consent. Participants reflected on how violations of personal boundaries, though common, go unspoken due to fear of social repercussions, hierarchical dynamics, or internalized discomfort. Power emerges as a fluid but deeply embedded factor influencing autonomy, shaped by age, gender, social hierarchy, beauty norms, and economic status. Girls reported feeling pressure to perform despite discomfort, to conform to external expectations regarding clothing or physical expression, and to suppress pain or objection for fear of appearing weak. Breaches of consent, both subtle and overt, are often rationalized or ignored, leading to emotional distress and internal conflict. The theme also emphasizes the challenge of asserting personal boundaries in a collectivist setting where silence, compliance, and performance are socially rewarded.

Bodily Autonomy, Consent, and Power

The analysis also examines the layered and often fraught experiences of adolescent girls navigating bodily autonomy and consent within the context of sport and daily life. Through facilitated activities and reflective dialogue, participants articulated how consent, particularly related to physical space, touch, and decision-making, is rarely acknowledged or respected, especially for girls and younger individuals. The intersections of age, social hierarchy, and power emerged as critical in shaping who gets to assert boundaries and who must conform. Participants shared that while boundaries exist internally, articulating them publicly, especially against family members, elders, or peers, is difficult due to fear of retaliation, judgment, or exclusion. The sports field becomes a microcosm for these dynamics, where gender hierarchies, leadership positions, and caste or linguistic privileges shape interactions. The absence of dialogue around consent, the normalization of power imbalances, and the discomfort in asserting boundaries revealed the underlying silence around bodily autonomy. These reflections underscore the importance of creating spaces where girls can exercise agency, challenge violations, and redefine their relationships with their bodies, peers, and authority.



STUMBLING BLOCKS



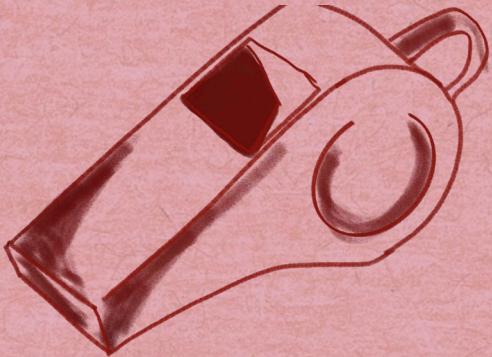
A. Challenges faced by NGOs in leading girls' sports programs in Jharkhand are multifaceted, stemming from socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and logistical hurdles.

Here's a breakdown of the key stumbling blocks:

- **Sociocultural Impediments:** Patriarchal belief and societal expectations viewing sports as masculine discourage girls' participation, prioritizing domestic duties and academics. Safety concerns and restricted mobility due to fear of harassment limit access to sports. Lack of family support and early marriage with household duties further reduce opportunities. Cultural practices like purdah and menstruation-related restrictions also pose challenges to girls' involvement in sports.
- **Financial Limitations:** NGOs face challenges in supporting girls' sports due to limited and inconsistent funding, hindering infrastructure, equipment, coaching (especially female coaches), and transportation. Government initiatives in Jharkhand have limited visibility and reach for girls and young women. Furthermore, insufficient sports facilities and the high cost of participation (equipment, uniforms, travel) create significant barriers for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Logistical and Operational Challenges:** Inadequate transportation poses a significant barrier to girls' sports participation, particularly for those in rural or underserved areas where public transit options may be limited or unsafe. This lack of reliable access can prevent girls from attending practices, games, and other sports-related activities, effectively excluding them from valuable opportunities for physical activity, teamwork, and personal development. A shortage of female coaches and role models further exacerbates the issue. Girls often benefit from having female mentors who can understand their unique experiences, provide guidance, and inspire them to pursue their athletic goals. The absence of visible and relatable female figures in coaching and leadership positions can discourage girls from participating and limit their aspirations within the sporting world.

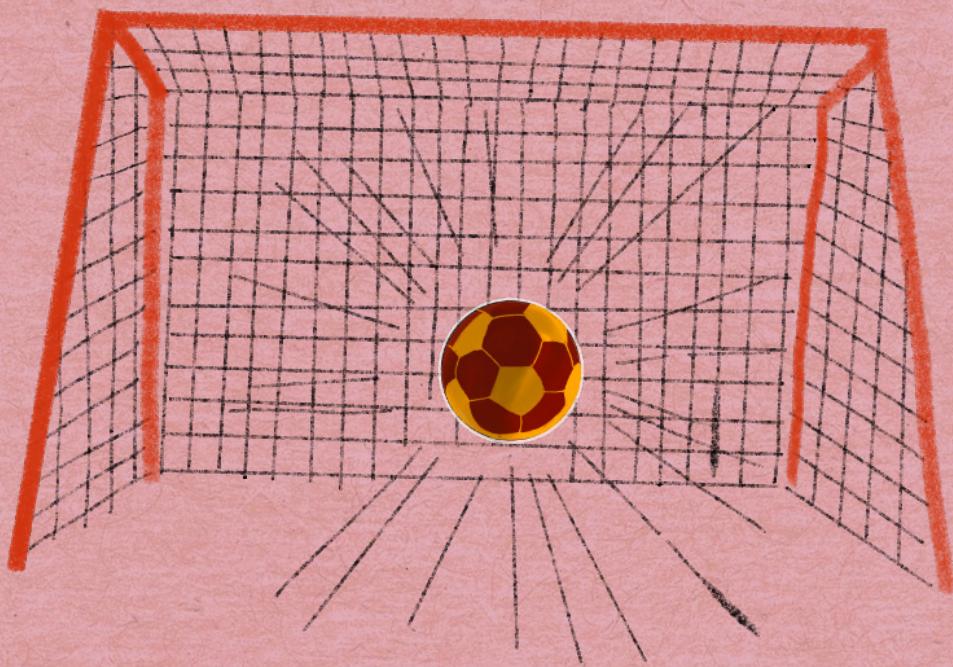
B. What are the key challenges to effectively addressing the discourse around bodily autonomy and CEFM in sport-based programs?

- Programs are just ticking a box on participation in sports. Occasional matches, engagement of coaches mostly as volunteers or periodically, for sports-based interventions have never ensured girls are playing and are active in sports. “We have identified a coach who guides them in between (irregular). The coach provides hand holding support for girls interested in the sport who are facing challenges/difficulties on the ground.” It was also reported that in a few cases, the local boys from the village, sometimes brothers of participating girls, who were already trained in sport, are being called upon to train the girls.
- Organizations are unclear about how to engage and integrate the conversation around bodily autonomy/CEFM on the ground. Programs are mostly found to leverage facilitators/trainers from the organization and/or women affiliated with self-help groups to discuss gender, bodily autonomy, and CEFM related aspects. There are very few initiatives that have tried to challenge prevalent gender inequalities in society through sports by developing strategies that could provide opportunities for girls to better understand their bodies and rights.
- Integration into Existing Programs: Effectively integrating discussions about bodily autonomy and CEFM into sports activities requires careful planning, age-appropriate materials, and trained facilitators who can handle sensitive topics. Often it has been witnessed that sports coaches are not trained on the issues of gender and bodily autonomy, leading to limited scope of their involvement in the program. Thus participating coaches, and even program facilitators have limited awareness of what constitutes bodily autonomy, the harmful impacts of CEFM, and their rights under the law.



- Challenging Traditional Norms, Fear of External Interference and Lack of Community Support: Addressing bodily autonomy and CEFM directly challenges deeply ingrained social and gender norms, which can lead to resistance from families, community leaders, and even program participants themselves. Some communities may view discussions about these issues as external interference in their cultural practices and resist engagement. Thus, without the active support and buy-in of the wider community, efforts to address bodily autonomy and CEFM within sports programs may be undermined.
- Collaboration and Coordination Addressing CEFM and promoting bodily autonomy requires collaboration among NGOs, government agencies, community leaders, schools, and families. Establishing effective partnerships can be complex, but without multi-stakeholder engagement, progress would be limited.

WAY FORWARD



Embed Discussions Within Sports Sessions

It is crucial to embed discussions on bodily autonomy, gender, consent, and empowerment within sports sessions, rather than addressing them separately. Consent-based games should be a possible means to incorporate by adapting warm-up drills to subtly introduce the concept of consent. Following a game or activity, a brief circle discussion centered on respecting each other's space and bodies during play should be conducted. Questions such as, "How did it feel when someone respected your space during the game?", "What course of action is taken if one feels uncomfortable while playing?", and "What measures can be implemented to ensure everyone feels safe and comfortable during play?" should be posed to encourage dialogue. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on personal limits during fitness exercises by encouraging participants to listen to their bodies and cease activity if pain or discomfort arises. It should be stressed that modifying exercises to suit individual abilities and limits is acceptable.

Strengthen Coach and Facilitator Capacities

Invest in intensive training for all coaches/facilitators on by provide comprehensive training for all coaches and facilitators, focusing on:

- **Gender sensitivity.**
- **Identification and management of aggression and consent violations.**
- **Development of constructive leadership approaches.**
- **Measures to combat sexual abuse and harassment in the sports playground and the steps to be taken if there are cases or reports.**

Actively recruit and support female coaches and peer mentors, while ensuring male coaches receive thorough training on consent and bodily autonomy. Instruct coaches and facilitators to identify and capitalize on "teachable moments"—periods of heightened emotion, conflict, or collaborative challenges—to initiate meaningful discussions.

Explicitly Address Consent and Violation

Develop distinct educational modules focused on the concept of bodily consent, specifically tailored to athletic environments, extending beyond the context of sexual relationships. Address the delineation between acceptable and unacceptable physical contact during athletic activities, both amongst participants and between participants and supervisory personnel.

Link Sports with Broader Life Goals

Impactful girls' programs require a holistic approach beyond athletics, focusing on educational advancement through quality schooling and supportive environments. Economic empowerment is crucial, offering vocational training, entrepreneurial skills, and resources for financial independence. Child safeguarding, with robust protection mechanisms and collaboration with local authorities, is integral. Addressing education, economic empowerment, and safety through partnerships ensures lasting, transformative change, enabling girls to reach their full potential.

Support Long-Term Community

Establishing early community trust is vital for successful youth interventions. This requires actively engaging parents through informative dialogues and involvement, local leaders by seeking their guidance and endorsement, and Anganwadi workers for their community reach and insights.

For long-term impact, sports groups should transition to self-management through supported processes. Girls' collectives can be empowered with leadership training and resources to manage their activities. Community sports clubs should be developed by engaging local volunteers, securing resources, and establishing sustainable structures. Fostering trust and enabling self-management ensures the sustainability of youth sports programs.

Prioritize Inclusion and Language Sensitivity

Regionally adapted and culturally relevant sports interventions, like football in Santhal and hockey in Khundi, enhance adolescent girls' engagement by leveraging existing enthusiasm and infrastructure. Facilitators fluent in local languages are crucial for effective communication and building trust. Younger girls are often more receptive to sports programs, necessitating age-specific tailoring. Programs for younger girls should focus on fun and foundational skills, while those for older adolescents may include leadership opportunities and address barriers to participation. Addressing regional, cultural, linguistic, and age-related factors is vital for the success of these interventions.

Be Conscious of Contextual Realities

In regions such as Jharkhand, where engaging in sports is a culturally ingrained norm, leverage this widespread acceptance as a foundation for more profound empowerment initiatives. These initiatives should extend beyond mere athletic participation and aim to facilitate tangible improvements in life circumstances for individuals. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that even within communities that embrace sports, significant social and economic obstacles, including poverty and the prevalence of early marriage, continue to exist and hinder progress. Therefore, empowerment programs must be designed to address these multifaceted challenges comprehensively, ensuring that the positive influence of sports can truly translate into meaningful and lasting societal change.

Integrate Monitoring and Adaptation

Traditional evaluations of girls' empowerment interventions often lack depth by focusing on participation rates instead of the evolution of girls' agency and long-term life outcomes. To better understand the impact, evaluations should observe qualitative growth in girls' confidence, communication, autonomy, and challenges to gender norms using methods like interviews and longitudinal studies. Furthermore, tracking long-term outcomes such as education, delayed marriage/childbearing, leadership, economic empowerment, and reduced vulnerability is crucial.

Robust data collection systems involving local stakeholders are needed to follow girls over time. This holistic evaluation approach provides a deeper understanding of interventions' true impact and ensures sustained empowerment.

Building Safe and Trust-Based Spaces for Girls

Ensure deliberate creation of safe, trust-based environments where girls could openly share their concerns, express themselves, and receive support without fear of judgment. These spaces were cultivated through empathetic listening, confidentiality, and mutual vulnerability—often facilitated by community mobilizers who shared their own stories. Safe spaces became essential for girls to discuss sensitive topics like menstruation, child marriage, harassment, and bodily changes. Trust building with families and the community also reinforced girls' sense of security and legitimacy in participating in sports and related discussions. **Leadership, Ownership, and Role Modeling Among Girls:** This theme explores how sports participation catalyzed the emergence of leadership, initiative, and peer mentorship among adolescent girls. As girls gained confidence and skills, they began taking ownership of program activities—selecting teams, leading discussions, organizing travel, training younger girls, and voicing their needs. This shift signaled a transformation from passive participants to active change agents. Moreover, girls who demonstrated resilience and commitment became role models within their communities, inspiring other girls and altering perceptions about girls' potential to lead both on and off the field.

Sports as a Medium for Life Skills and SRHR Education

This theme highlights the integration of sports with life skills and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education. Sports were not only used as physical activity but also as a pedagogical tool to introduce sensitive topics such as menstruation, bodily changes, gender, and sexuality.

Through structured activities, creative games, and facilitated discussions, adolescent girls were encouraged to explore their rights, communicate effectively, and build decision-making capacities. This approach helped dismantle taboos, improve knowledge retention, and enabled girls to relate bodily autonomy and reproductive rights with broader goals of confidence and self-empowerment.



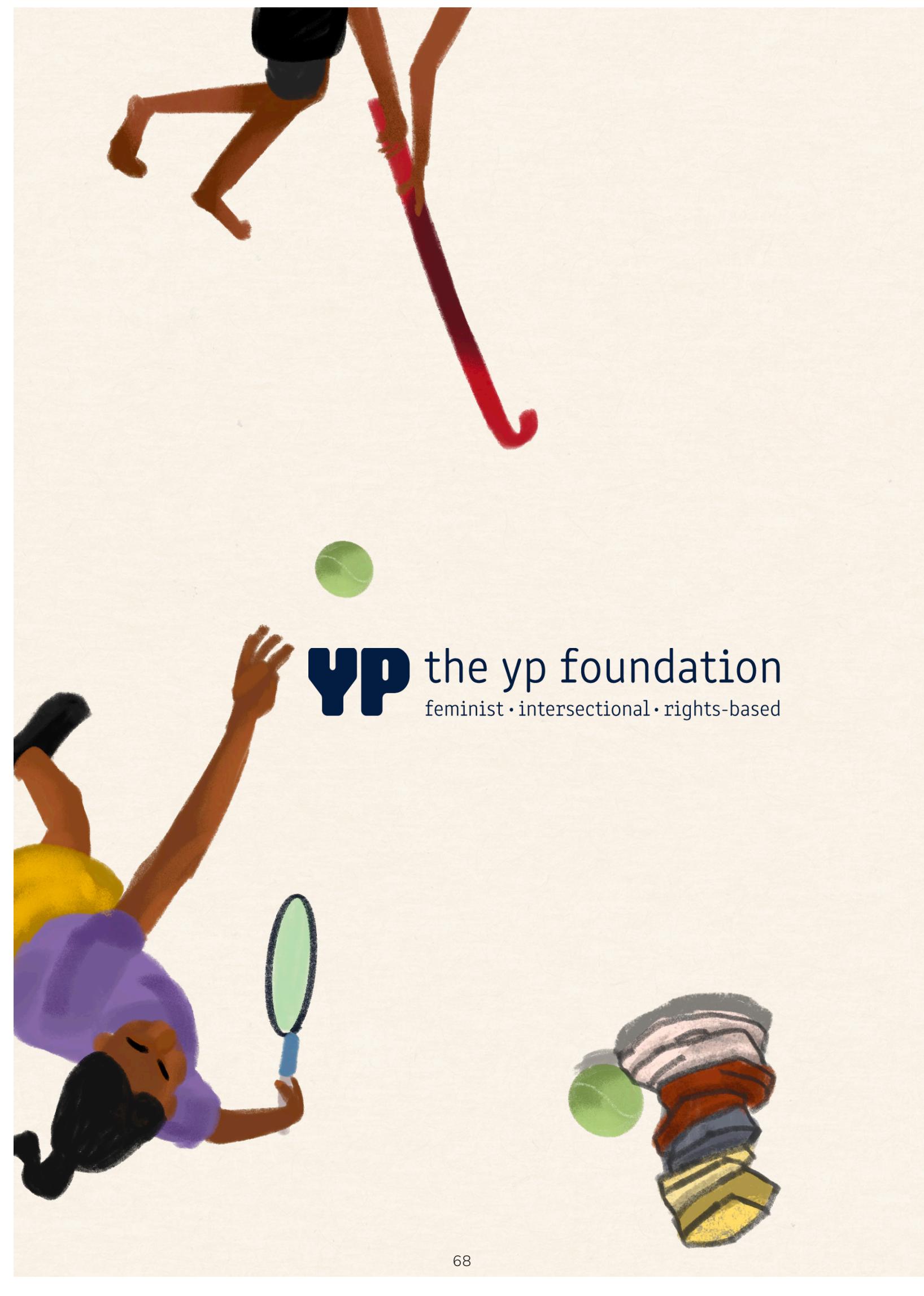
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