

Case Study: Reducing Gender-Based Violence to Help Girls Stay in School in Rural India

BACKGROUND: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL AGE GIRLS IN INDIA

Gender-based violence (GBV) against girls, including sexual harassment, abuse, and exploitation, is a pressing human rights issue that has devastating impacts around the world. For school-aged girls in India and globally, GBV creates significant deterrents to attending school, undermining girls' health, security, and dignity and preventing millions of girls from fulfilling their dreams. As many as **109 children in India** were abused each day in 2018, a 22% increase from the previous year (National Crime Record Bureau). Despite the prevalence of abuse, many Indian schools lack the resources and capacity to recognize, document, and report GBV. This lack of resources has caused many girls who experience GBV to avoid attending school or to drop out of school entirely. Additionally, GBV often goes unreported, as victims fear reprisal and blame within their communities.

The prevalence of GBV is far higher in rural parts of India, where social stigma prevents survivors from speaking out about their experiences, and community leaders often lack awareness of the lasting effects of GBV on children. The Government of India established the **Protection of Children against Sexual Offences**



Rise Up Leader Tania Fernandes Echaporía

(POCSO) Act in 2012 to address these issues and protect children from sexual assault, sexual harassment, and exploitation. However, the law has been poorly implemented and GBV against girls continues to occur at staggering rates.

A CHAMPION FOR GIRLS

Rise Up Leader **Tania Fernandes Echaporía** has always been passionate about protecting the rights and safety of girls. After spending the first 25 years of her professional life in the corporate sector, Tania recently shifted careers to focus on preventing gender-based violence as Director for Operations and Partnerships at the **Red Dot Foundation**. When Tania was selected to participate in Rise Up's intensive Advocacy and

Leadership Accelerator in 2018, she learned how to use advocacy to create large-scale change for girls. After the Accelerator, Tania designed an advocacy campaign to fully implement the POCSO Act in local school districts in order to encourage better reporting of GBV so that more girls live free from violence and stay in school. “Girls fear raising their voices about being harassed since they might be married off at a very young age or [forced to] drop-out of school — hence, most girls prefer to stay silent,” said Tania.

Rise Up awarded Tania [funding](#) to launch her project, which she called Bal Suraksha. Her project strategy is to educate teachers, school authorities, parents, and children about GBV and its impacts, then mobilize them to better implement the POCSO Act to reduce the prevalence of violence against girls. In her work with the Red Dot Foundation, Tania saw that the officers at the Child Welfare Department in Jawli, Maharashtra, had not undergone any specialized training on the POCSO Act, and as a result, they did not know how to report abuse. Similarly, although local schools believed that they were adequately teaching students about GBV through their biology course curriculum, many girls were not receiving the information or support they needed. Given these gaps in the effective implementation of the POCSO Act, Tania felt that working with local schools to better



Students in a rural school learn about gender based violence during a Bal Suraksha event.

understand and address these issues was key to reducing GBV. With support from Rise Up, Tania trained 40 high school students as “Know Your Rights Educators” to advocate for the implementation of the POCSO Act in 20 local schools. Ultimately, these advocates plan to educate 20,000 students and 500 parents about how to address and prevent GBV across four villages in the Satara district of Maharashtra. To build community support for implementing the POCSO Act, Tania also conducted

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workshops with teachers, principals, students, and parents, implemented community awareness campaigns, and helped facilitate discussions between local authorities and schools.

Additionally, Tania assisted schools in creating a resource network that can help respond to and take action against GBV, including police, lawyers, and non-governmental organizations. "Rise Up's constant coaching, constructive feedback, and assistance during the project has helped not only with this project but many other projects," said Tania, adding, "I believe I am [now] able to do so much more in my organization [even] compared to people who have done their master's in social science disciplines."

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

In late 2019, elections and persistent rains resulted in the closure of schools in the region, creating new challenges for Tania and her project team. Tania turned her attention to disseminating an analysis of the gaps in implementation of the POCSO Act to the Child Welfare Department, the Educational Welfare Department, and schools in the region. She briefed over 350 teachers, students, and principals to promote better implementation of the POCSO Act, advance more equitable gender norms, and to prevent GBV. Tania and the teachers, students, and principals together created a "charter of demands" responsive to the needs of girls, schools, governments, and the community.

Tania was successful in creating a bridge between schools and the government, getting the local District Council and the Educational Block Officer to agree to address the demands of



Tania (third from top right) with fellow Rise Up Leaders at the Women Deliver Conference in 2019.

the teachers, students, and principals and to help implement the Bal Suraksha project.

In the midst of Tania's advocacy, the COVID-19 pandemic raised additional challenges. Seeing the devastating effects of the pandemic lockdown on vulnerable women and girls, Tania and the Red Dot Foundation recently filed public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India to classify domestic violence shelters and resources as essential services so they are available for women and girls even during the pandemic.

With continued support from Rise Up, Tania has adapted her strategies for Bal Suraksha to respond to the health and safety



Tania in a group activity during the Rise Up Accelerator in 2019.

concerns created by the pandemic. Tania has successfully shifted to digital organizing, building an online community of young girls, boys, parents, teachers, NGOs, and influential women to help reduce GBV and advocate for better implementation of the POCSO Act. She continues to train “Know Your Rights Educators” through online platforms, with innovative sessions on addressing GBV and community education. Tania also holds weekly online sessions to encourage students, teachers, and parents to address issues related to GBV that can be hard to

discuss and build their confidence and comfort in communicating about these subjects. Additionally, Tania utilizes secure digital platforms to provide children a safe space to communicate their personal problems during these difficult times.

THE PATH FORWARD

The Bal Suraksha project has been so tremendously successful that the Local Council and the Educational Officer have committed to supporting Tania to expand the Bal Suraksha program into all 256 schools of the Satara district, impacting up to 12,000 students. Reflecting on her project and time so far as a Rise Up Leader, Tania said, “Rise Up has helped me grow, built my capability and leadership, and encouraged me to push beyond my boundaries.”

Moving forward, Rise Up will continue to offer coaching, technical assistance, and competitive funding opportunities for Tania and the Red Dot Foundation to sustain their important work to reduce GBV in schools and ensure the POCSO Act is properly implemented. In the future, Tania plans to develop more “Know Your Rights Educators” and build a network of alumni, stakeholders, and NGOs to expand Bal Suraksha’s impact into schools across India, helping more girls to pursue their education and fulfill their dreams.

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