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Delhi, India

**RANGEEN
KHIDKI**

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Learning By Locals

MY BODY, MY RIGHTS

A LOOK INTO THE PROGRAMME

Rangeen Khidki Foundation primarily works in the space of sexual and reproductive health and rights with a special focus on adolescents. The My Body My Rights program is a comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) program which aims to bring about behavioural and attitudinal changes in the youth, to help them unlearn and relearn relevant concepts of gender, sexuality and overall well being. This program was conducted with 16 adolescents from Delhi in the month of March, 2022 in collaboration with Learning By Locals(LBL). LBL aims to educate and empower today's youth by helping them develop personal and professional skills in addition to providing them with the right opportunities and guidance. They are currently situated in Sanjay Colony, Okhla and conducts after-school classes for 70+ students. Over the years, they have successfully created a safe for the students to interact without hesitation and speak freely about their aspirations and reservations.

Our common goal of empowering young people to dream big and achieve their goals gave way to this partnership, wherein the students of LBL participated in a 4 day CSE Workshop from 11th to 13th and 15th March, 2022. The workshop was conducted with 6 male adolescents and 9 female adolescents over a span of 4 days. The first 3 days of the workshop was conducted in person at the LBL Centre in Sanjay Colony, Delhi and the 4th day of the workshop took place online via a Zoom Meeting.



The workshop started with discussions around body, puberty and anatomy. The students opened up from the very beginning of the workshop and a safe space was easily established for the proceedings of the discussions that followed. It was interesting to see that most of the adolescents had numerous questions about their own as well as other bodies. The physical changes that occur during puberty in male and female bodies were pointed out by the female students very promptly. They also mentioned mental changes such as getting mood swings, having increased curiosity and going through hormonal changes which leads to attraction. Majority of the students mentioned that they had studied about anatomy in their schools, around classes 8 or 9, but were not aware of the functions in detail. They also mentioned that the chapter on reproductive system was either completely skipped or taught in a rush and that the male students were never taught about the process of menstruation. Some of the female students were aware of the fact that menstrual blood is not dirty or impure blood. But the rest of the students, including the male students, said that they were told that it is a form of illness and something that is impure. They further added that it was the first time in their lives that they were having an open conversation about bodies, genitals and menstruation and getting the opportunity to learn about it.



Our society taboos these conversions and that often leads to spread of misinformation and stigmatisation. The students themselves realised that access to bodily information is crucial for them as it adds to their knowledge and well being. The male students had questions about the process of menstruation and female anatomy. Similarly the female students were curious about male bodies and by the end of the discussion a lot of misinformation was clarified regarding both bodies. The students also decided to mention their genitals without using euphemisms henceforth. The conversation then moved onto discussing the differences between public and private body parts. The concept of public parts that some of the students had were surrounding the ideas of something that can be seen and is not hidden away and something that we can talk about easily.







One of them mentioned that if they get a cut on their hand, they can easily show it to their parents and communicate the problem, whereas if it was a cut on either their breast, penis or vagina, they would not have been able to do the same. These examples also reiterated the fact that their bodies and genitals were stigmatised to the extent that they could not talk about them even if there was a medical issue. The conversation then steered into the direction of how what is private and public is subjective and varies among individuals. One of the muslim female students talked about how her hair is extremely private for her whereas that is not the case for most of her hindu friends. Another female student added to this and said that even her hand is private to her and she would not want a stranger to touch it or even look at it. The group then reflected upon this and concluded that one's entire body is private to them.

While discussing the concepts of body image and self esteem, the students were asked to participate in an activity where they were asked to rate themselves and a person most beautiful according to me, out of 10. It was heartwarming to see that most of them rated themselves quite high and talked about valuing themselves from within and viewing themselves beyond the established societal standards. But some of them rated themselves low and said that they did not think that they were beautiful. In fact one of the male students rated himself 2 out of 10 and said that he thinks that he is neither beautiful nor intelligent. It was at this moment that another female student from the group intervened and shared a beautiful story about the above mentioned male student. She said that one day, when they were all playing together in the field, the male student had touched her by mistake and sincerely apologised to her immediately. She added on to say that touch is a common thing while playing a physical sport and he need not have apologised, but it is because he had noticed that she was not comfortable with touch that he immediately stopped and said that he was sorry and this meant a lot to her.





She concluded this story by saying that he might rate himself a 2 out of 10, but she would rate him a 10 out of 10 for being an amazing friend. This story was a great thread that tied the conversation to the concepts of personal space, consent and boundaries. The group had a deep understanding of personal space and boundaries and after discussing the qualities of consent, an activity which connected the three concepts of personal space, boundaries and consent was presented to the entire group by two volunteers. The activity showed how the volunteers were feeling angry and uncomfortable when their space, boundaries and consent were violated and how they were feeling at peace when the three things were being respected. This activity also portrayed the fact that boundaries are subjective and do not look the same for everyone. For example, an individual might be okay with sharing their personal space with their sibling but might not be okay with sharing it with any other family member. One video on consent that was shown to the group talked about how a man declared that a woman was his girlfriend without taking her consent first. One of the female members mentioned that the exact same thing had happened to her and that she was furious about it. The point that was highlighted at the end of this discussion was that communicating how one is feeling is important and that we need to communicate when our consent is being violated.





The conversations around the impact of peer pressure and bullying was also linked to the concepts of self esteem. Most of the students shared instances of when they were bullied and how that affected their confidence. One of the female students shared her experience of being bullied at school: “I was told that you are so thin, you don’t look good. I was told that my chest is flat. I used to cry all the time and it affected me so much that I did not leave home for a while.” Another female student shared that: “I was told that you cannot be good at maths but I am good at it. I was told that your nose is very thick, no boy will ever propose to you. I used to look at myself in the mirror and cry. I felt like killing myself. No one will get to judge me if I am not alive. But now I realise that everyone is different and I need to accept myself. I am still working on it.” Another student shared: “ In my brother’s school one boy urinated in a bottle and made his juniors drink it.”.

A society as harsh as this will never grow up to be empathetic and kind. The cycle of bullying is difficult to break out from, one of the students added by saying that the mentality of bullying is that if I had to go through it, I will do it to someone else as well. The students also discussed this by taking examples of various hindi movies such as 'Table no. 21' and '3 idiots.' This discussion concluded with the realisation that one word of kindness can change a person's whole life. One of the female students said that she was fat shamed all her life and at one point she even stopped eating. But one boy in her class praised her hair and her eyes and that changed the way she looked at herself. She said that a thousand people just saw that she was fat, but that one boy saw her beyond that and that changed her life. The first day of the workshop concluded with discussions around the importance of acknowledging mental health and overall well being.



The students seemed extremely eager and motivated to learn about gender and sex identities. 6 students said that they used to think that gender and sex are the same thing, some of the other students confused gender with sexuality. During the course of the session, they learnt about how the three (gender, sex and sexuality) are different and how none of them can be simplified into binaries. They had questions about sexuality and attraction and were curious to know more about how same sex couples engaged in physical intimacy. For example one of the students asked whether or not gay men feel like having sexual intercourse, another student asked what being a lesbian felt like. The conversations opened up to a point where one female student said that she was attracted to people of both genders and felt peaceful knowing that it was okay to feel that way. One important difference that was clarified during the discussions gender and sex identities was the difference between intersex people and transgender people. When the students were asked to remember the first time they realised what their gender was, the students responded by saying that some of them realised their gender by how they were dressed up since childhood.



Others mentioned that the toys that were given to them as children were always decided upon normative gender stereotypes. One student mentioned that when she first joined school, she noticed that the female students were asked to wear skirts and the male students were expected to wear pants and that is when she realised her gender. Gender based roles and expectations also came to the surface during these conversations, one of the male students said that when he was around 6 years old and he got hurt while playing, he was told not to cry because he was a boy. Another female student talked about how her brother was given more gifts and food since their childhood and she realised that it was because he was a boy and she was not. Some of the older students in the group further talked about how women are often slut shamed for having male friends and men are called sensitive and given slang if they behave effeminate. The group questioned every experience of their daily lives through a gender neutral lens and realised how patriarchy (पितृसत्ता) negatively affects people of all genders. They even questioned mainstream movies and how popular culture often reproduces gender stereotypes and gender inequality.





The conversations around abuse and violence were heartbreaking. Each and every student shared their stories of abuse and it was devastating to see that so many children have to go through violence on a daily basis. Before sharing their stories, one of the female students said that this was the first time that they were getting an opportunity and were feeling safe to talk about their experiences. Other students added by saying that the first thing women are told is that it is their fault so where will they go? “कहाँ जाएगी लड़कियां”. Another female student added by saying, “Women are always blamed. We are asked to keep shut. We cannot talk about our experiences because the family name will get ruined. So the abuser is always roaming around freely, even in front of us.” Most of the female students said that their incidents of abuse haunt them till date, unaware of how trauma resides inside not only our minds but also our bodies. A female student said that whatever had happened to her was done by her own uncle, “It affects me so much, I hate touch. I cannot even hug my father properly. I can’t sleep next to my brother, even if our legs touch by mistake, I start shivering. My mother does not understand and tells me that I am avoiding my family. I can talk to boys, but if anyone touches me I freeze.”

Another female student from the group added by saying that it hurts when a person you trust so much, ends up harassing you. It develops a feeling of mistrust towards all men. Another student shared her story of abuse and said, “The first time it happened, I didn’t understand anything. I did not process what was happening. I did not know how to react. When I realised what had happened and wanted to complain, there was a certain pressure put on me, that if I complain the person’s career will get affected. But what about me?” Her voice choked up and she teared up as she started to talk about the long term effects of abuse. The group discussed how women in their families are suppressed while men take up space at home as well as on the streets. The male students in the group actively participated in the conversations and were determined to bring about structural change.

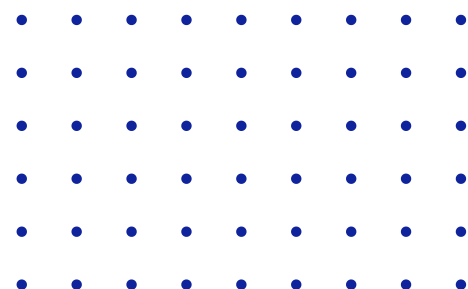


The group talked about how they are a part of a community where domestic violence is extremely prevalent. They said that women are taught that it is okay to get beaten up by their husbands. So even when one tries to intervene in a house where there is domestic abuse happening, the women themselves choose to protect their husbands and families. A student added by saying, “My own father was abusive to my mother in front of our eyes but she never left. Now she tells me that she never had a support system to be able to leave.” To this another male student added by saying that if you systematically and structurally keep women locked at home, if you do not allow them education and do not allow them to get a job, then how will she escape an abusive marriage? Where will she go?





Another female student said that one of her neighbours drinks every night and hits his wife and the sounds of her scream used to travel up to the 4th floor. She asked the group to imagine the effect this had on their children, to see their mother get beaten up and to hear her screams every night. These kids will grow up to learn that violence against women is normal. The group talked about how the police are often reluctant to intervene and even if a husband is taken away to jail, the woman is questioned on how she will survive in the society without a male member providing for her. The group said that in their community, if a wife leaves her abusive husband and works hard and raises her kids, the society will still talk ill about her by saying that she must be doing some dirty work to get money, “गलत काम करती होगी”. The students not only identified physical abuse but also discussed all forms of violence ranging across, emotional, economical, verbal and sexual.



The conversations made the group realise how every societal problem is deeply ingrained into the histories and existing structures of our current institutions. They realised the importance of having peaceful conversations to bring about change in the basic thought process of individuals. The most important point that came to the surface was to create a world around them free of judgement and full of kindness and empathy. The offline workshop concluded with a fun activity which made the students reflect on the existing and unfair structures of power and how it is related to all forms of discrimination.



The last day of the workshop was conducted online and covered informative topics such as contraceptives, pregnancy and abortion. The students were curious to learn and had interesting questions during the process. One of them asked whether or not a female body gets pregnant after rape, another student asked whether a small breast size of a female body is capable of producing enough milk to feed a new born. A male student asked whether it was possible to engage in sexual intercourse when a female body was either menstruating or was pregnant. The group had questions about IVF, surrogacy, double fertilisation, premature deliveries and miscarriages. One of them also asked why a female body gets stretch marks during pregnancy and whether or not it was possible to avoid it. After having all their questions answered, the session came to a conclusion and the group decided to draw up small initiatives to drive change within their communities.

Way Forward

The discussions from the session encouraged the students to bring about change not only within themselves but also around them. They decided to continue spreading information and awareness in various forms. Some students decided to actively initiate peer to peer learning within their community and start talking to them about different gender and sex identities. We also suggested that the male members of the group may engage in a program which asks individuals to redefine masculinity. The male students were eager to take this up and decided to ideate a plan which aims to affect male adolescents within their community. One major concern that emerged from our discussions was that of domestic violence. We suggested the group as well as members of our partner organisation (Learning by Locals) to take the assistance of organisations specialised in tackling situations of domestic violence. Each and every student decided to talk about the learnings from the session with their families and friends. They also decided to have continuous sessions on similar topics in their LBL classrooms. The female students were passionate about eradicating gender stereotypes and destigmatising menstruation and thus decided to hold group discussions with members of their community to discuss these in detail.





Reflections

I liked a lot of things about this session. For example, the session was conducted with girls and boys together and previously I used to feel uncomfortable talking about certain things in front of boys, but now I won't be. A lot of important things were explained to us in an easy manner, very effective.

I liked this program because it has given me a lot of knowledge and we learnt many interesting things which were previously unknown to us. I have also changed myself and learnt how to give respect to all genders.

One thing I really liked about this program was the open discussions. We enjoyed the session and learnt new things about human bodies. I would like to spread what I have learnt within my friend circle.

I liked the information that was given to us. It is very helpful and makes us aware about our body and so many more things.

KNOWLEDGE LEVEL

