

# It's My Body

Advancing Sexual and Reproductive  
Health and Rights of Adolescent Girls through Sports



*“My entire life, I have been taught to say NO to everything. But now, I want to say what I really want! I want to say YES to what I really want! I want to say YES to going to school...I want to say YES to going out...I want to say YES to playing football...I want to say YES to all the things that bring happiness to me!”*

*– An adolescent girl from IMB programme, Jharkhand, India*



# **CREA's**

## **Theory of Change**

CREA believes that building the self-confidence, leadership, and knowledge of women and girls about their sexuality and human rights, and creating feminist platforms to challenge oppressive norms and power structures will enable women and girls to make their own decisions, exert control over their bodies, and demand their rights.



## Rationale

Bodily autonomy and integrity of adolescent girls in India are violated in multiple ways. Many are forced into early marriages with boys or men they have never met. Girls' mobility is restricted, which hinders their access to opportunities related to education, health and overall well-being. Issues related to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) remain taboo within Indian society. Silence and stigma associated with these issues have meant that many people particularly those marginalised, such as adolescent girls, young people, people with disabilities, and women often do not have a chance to access information and clarify myths and misconceptions around SRH.

Contraceptive services are absent in many parts of India, and the decision to use them generally lies with men. Even where reproductive health services are available, social stigma often deters adolescent girls from using them. Addressing issues related to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in a way that encompasses issues of sexuality, bodily autonomy, consent, choice, and pleasure is incredibly challenging. Such work meets reluctance and resistance at all levels - families, communities, schools, health service providers, community-based organisations, government officials and policymakers.

Severe policing and restrictions on the mobility of girls, norms related to gender, body and sexuality, and rigid notions of masculinity and femininity make it difficult for girls to access public spaces and to play freely and openly in the fields and playgrounds. Sports such as football are traditionally associated with boys. They are often told that 'good girls' don't roam about and play outside and that any injury to the body will affect their chances of getting married.

Capitalising on its experience of 15 years of work on issues of gender, sexuality, SRHR, and women's rights, CREA began to engage directly with adolescent and young girls in 2009 through the It's My Body program, which focuses on SRHR using sports.









## It's My Body Programme

CREA co-implements the It's My Body (IMB) programme with twelve community-based partner organisations<sup>1</sup> in ten districts of the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. In its short journey that started in 2013, the programme has been able to work directly with over 6000 adolescent girls and reach out to over 9000 adolescent girls and young women indirectly.

The IMB programme works with adolescent girls to affirm and promote their rights to make informed decisions about their bodies, health and lives. The programme brings together girls by forming collectives at the village level and provides trainings on various aspects of SRHR, Gender, Sexuality, Bodily Autonomy and Rights through sports.

The IMB programme also works with the parents and families of the girls enrolled in the programme as well as with local health service providers (HSP) to facilitate their access to locally available health services, which often is restricted due to stigma and their health needs not being given priority. The programme also engages with local schools and with other community members and stakeholders to advocate for equal opportunities for education, training and sports for girls in schools

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<sup>1</sup> Partner organisations

- a. Uttar Pradesh : Gramonnati Sansthan, Mahoba; Mahila Swarozgar Samiti, Benares; Sakar, Bareilly; Sadbhavna Trust, Lucknow and Veerangana Mahila Vikas Manch, Jhansi
- b. Bihar : Akanksha Sewa Sadan, Muzaffarpur; Gaurav Grameen Mahila Vikas Sansthan, Patna and Nari Nidhi, Muzaffarpur
- c. Jharkhand : Lok Prerana Kendra, Hazaribagh; Mahila Mukti Sanstha, Hazaribagh; Nurture Trust, West Singhbhum; Srijan Foundation, Ranchi and Hazaribagh

## Why Sport?

Several studies provide evidence of sports being an effective tool to empower girls by improving their physical and mental health, challenging gender norms around mobility and access to public spaces, and helping girls develop a sense of ownership of their bodies, thereby increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence. Participation in sports also helps girls to build upon their ‘community capital’, i.e. building and expanding their social networks, taking pride in being part of a collective, as well as recognising and inculcating values such as diversity, team spirit and solidarity, and strengthening their leadership and decision-making skills.

Sports has proved to be an effective strategy In the IMB programme as well, as it breaks gender stereotypes about who can and should play sports. It can be used as a fun medium to initiate conversation with girls about sensitive topics, such as mobility (accessing a public space in order to play sports), bodily autonomy, choice (what sport to play, where to play it, what to wear), consent, and pleasure (do I enjoy playing sports? why do I enjoy it? what do I dislike about it?). Discussions on these topics lead to deeper conversations around sexuality and rights.



# **It's My Body**

## **A comprehensive curriculum on SRHR, Sports and Life Skills**

### **Cluster 1: Understanding and questioning norms**

This cluster aims to build an understanding among adolescent girls on patriarchy, gender and the body. Session on norms, bodily changes, body image, body mapping are included along with the ones on self-confidence and self – esteem. The cluster also includes a sessions on sports and girls, which explores the attitudes and mindset which restrict the mobility of girls and keep them away from sports.

### **Cluster 2: Yes, No and Maybe**

This cluster seeks to further their understanding on issues of sexuality, consent, leadership and bodily autonomy. The cluster includes sessions on discrimination, abuse and violence, leadership and taking initiative. The cluster also talks about pleasure, choice and consent with the girls, enabling them to articulate their desires, likes and dislikes along with to negotiate and assert their opinions on matters related to their bodies, health and lives.

### **Cluster 3: Demand and Exercise Rights**

The last cluster of the curriculum provides information on HIV, Reproductive Health, and Contraception and allows girls to map locally available services and facilities. This cluster also encourages the girls to understand and use the strength of their collectives and team to demand and access their rights and services.





# Results

**The IMB programme has been successful in strengthening capacities and skills of the partner community based organisations (CBOs) to advance SRHR of adolescent girls using sports from a rights perspective.**

The IMB programme built the capacities of its partner organisations in working with adolescent girls to advance SRHR of adolescent girls using sports in a rights affirming manner, through new and innovative media. IMB programme is a complex SRHR initiative that brings together sports with gender, sexuality rights, autonomy and feminist leadership by forming girls' collectives. Working with adolescent girls has tremendously contributed to the organisations' body of work and has become an entry point into exploring various issues as well creative methods of working, beyond lecture or classroom- based ones.

*"This programme involves having to undo years and years of social conditioning in a context where the society tries to police the girls' sexuality and to curb their sexual expression. Girls take a long time to understand that talking about sexuality is not criminal. Before we even get to the parents and the community, it is the wall in the girls' heads that needs to be broken."*

– Head of a partner organisation in U.P.

*"Our organisation has made a big shift in terms of talking about sexuality with young girls. This programme has pushed us to discuss a difficult topic and also use sports in a more organised way. We have also made more connections with families of the girls and with local health service providers, which we hadn't done earlier in our work"*

– A Trainer from the partner organisation in U.P.



**The adolescent girls have increased autonomy to express their choices, demand their rights, access health and educational services, and resist negative discrimination and violence against them.**

- The *Kishori Manch (Adolescent girls group)* provides girls with a safe and secure space to share their experiences, ask questions and discuss their issues freely in a non-judgmental way. The sessions have allowed girls to share with each other their experiences of violence, their understanding of what love and relationships are, and ask questions freely about sex, sexuality, and bodily changes.
- Each training session (Total 25 “sessions over a period of 10 months”) has observed 70-75% attendance of adolescent girls. The first batch in 2013 did have a dropout rate of 9.6%. This reduced to 4% for the subsequent batches.
- An estimated 65% of the total girls who have been part of the IMB programme have increased knowledge on SRHR.
- An estimated 30-35 % of the total girls who participated in the IMB programme have been able to participate in decisions and negotiate delay their age of marriage, re-enroll in schools and pursue higher education.
- An estimated 60% of the total girls who participated in the IMB programme have begun to think positively about their bodies and themselves. Increased self-confidence and self-worth has been an important change that has been observed in the girls.

*“There are so many problems at home, but when I come and play football here, I forget about everything. I feel happy. I feel that I matter”*

– Kishori Manch member Gaurav Grameen Mahila Vikas Manch,  
Patna, Bihar

## Creation of a supportive and enabling environments in families and communities is resulting in increased mobility of adolescent girls

Community-level engagement through meetings with parents, local Health Service Providers and in-school and large-scale district level events have resulted in increased support and acceptability for the work with adolescent girls across Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. This is resulting in increased mobility and visibility of adolescent girls in public spaces. This has also allowed for an enabling and safe environment where girls can play sports without any fear of retaliation.

*“It’s good that girls in our community are interested in playing football, and that they have an opportunity to do so through this programme. All the girls take out time every evening to play.”*

– Parent of a girl from Jharkhand

*“My sisters now go to school alone and are not scared of anyone. Even the other girls in the community now play sports that were previously only played by boys, and people in the community encourage them to do so”.*

– Brother of an adolescent girl from Uttar Pradesh

*“ We are always made to think only of things like ration, wells and roads. Health of adolescent girls and unmarried girls is never an agenda in our discussions. It is important that we begin addressing these issues.”*

– Elected Women Representative, Jharkhand





## Improved access to local health and education services for adolescent and young girls

Girls have been able to demand information on use of Iron Folic tablets, sanitary napkins, vaccination and immunisation done for children in their villages, and the schedule and plan for health check-up camps for women and girls. This has also enabled adolescent girls and young women to access services freely without stigma and discrimination. An estimated 30-35% of the total girls enrolled in the program have begun to visit and demand health services from the local health centres. Supply of quality services and facilities remains a challenge.

*“Earlier girls from the village would not approach us for information, services, nutritional food etc. Now, I feel they are comfortable in talking to us. They are more aware and conscious of their health. They come to us with problems they face during menstruation”*

– Anganwadi worker, Mahoba



\*\*The data shared in this document hasn't been finalised, peer-reviewed and published, hence should not be cited.

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Founded in 2000, CREA is a feminist human rights organisation based in New Delhi, India. CREA works to advance the rights of women and girls, and the sexual and reproductive freedoms of all people. CREA advocates for positive social change through national and international fora, and provides training and learning opportunities to global activists and leaders through its Institutes. CREA is based in the Global South and works at the grassroots, national, regional, and international levels.

### **Vision**

CREA envisions a more just and peaceful world, where everyone lives with dignity, respect, and equality.

### **Mission**

CREA builds feminist leadership, advances women's human rights, and expands sexual and reproductive freedoms.

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