

Global Giving Open Challenge Letter

Challenging Traditional Roles

Ananya* surprised her family and friends when she scored 76 per cent marks in her higher secondary examination—something unheard of for a girl in her community. She wanted to take up political science for graduation, pursue a Masters and then work in the social sector in the field of women's rights. "I want to work for women's rights because I do not want any woman to go through what I went through," she says. However, Ananya's wedding was already fixed two years back with her late sister's husband. The reason was simple: her sister had a child who needed a mother. And this marriage would not cost any dowry. Ananya was only seventeen. It's been three years. Today, she is a graduate in political science, only because she made a deal with her parents that if she gets married as per their choice, she will be allowed to study. Simply put, she traded her life for her education.

Eighteen-year-old Shalini* has been displayed as an "eligible bride" in front of grown men ever since she was in fifth grade. Every time, a man came to check her out, she felt anger and hurt which would make her cry for days. Even as a child, she understood that she was just an object of display for the groom and nothing but a burden to be disposed off by her parents. She negotiated with her parents in different ways so she could be allowed to study just a little more. She graduated this year from college and is working while supporting her own education. "My dark skin has been a boon for me because no groom wants to marry a dark bride," she giggles.

All of Garima's* friends and cousins were married before the age of 15. And so was she as she was sent far away to her maternal grandparents' village with her new husband. With no friends nearby or family member around her in this completely new set up, her husband abused her physically and sexually every day. Being a city born and brought up girl, Garima mustered enough courage to run away after two years when she could no longer endure the violence. Though she returned to her parents' house in Delhi, they were unwilling to support her again and forcibly tried to send her back. They ordered her to be the "good wife" by returning to her husband. She resisted as much as she could. Today, Garima is working and supporting herself.

These are only three of the many stories that emerged from the Tech Center that FAT runs from New Delhi. While Ananya, Shalini and Garima are separated by their individuality, they are united not just by the similarity of their experience of facing oppression but also resisting it in their own way. They have all learned to fight for their rights at FAT and they are sure that they will never give up. Their major struggle since their adolescence has been to fight the pressure to get married early.

Early Marriages in India

India is said to become one of the emerging world powers in the near future but in a society that is still ridiculed with conservative notions of women and womanhood. The idea of positioning and situating women in households, to fulfill their primary roles has not only hampered their development but has been detrimental for their personal well being. Their familiarity and access to a new changing world is limited, especially for young girls who belong to an economically backward and a socially oppressed class. This is the group of adolescent girls that Feminist Approach to Technology aims to enable and empower.

Objective

The young girls in FAT are associated with the Tech Center where they learn how to use a computer, Internet, photography and film making. These classes are interspersed with workshops on women's rights, feminism and sexuality. Tech Center has worked with more than 300 girls from urban rural slums of South Delhi. The center has worked with the girls at various levels: from providing technical trainings to understanding women's rights to engaging in constant counseling with parents of the girls to working on issues that they experience in their local communities, like lack of clean and safe toilets.

The girls at FAT have repeatedly stated that the pressure to get married early has been the biggest hurdle in their growth. According to them, home feels like a space to fight whereas the Tech Center feels like the space to be yourself. But this has to change because neither can the Center be omnipresent in girls' lives nor can they depend on it lifelong. The girls at the center have both experientially and keenly observed that the issue of early marriages needs to be eradicated from their communities for their holistic development.

Therefore, the project is proposing to help young girls emerge as leaders in the community. The project will help them make negotiations which will not be visible only at a household but also at a community level through the medium of making and showcasing their films in their neighborhood. They will also be leading the campaign against early marriages in their community.

FAT's Strategy

FAT with the girls wants to engage in a process of making the voices of the girls heard in their community by helping them make films and photo books on this issue, in association with Voices of Women in Media (VOW Media). VOW Media will actively be participating in training girls in photography and film making through women-centric approach. This method has proved to be very effective for girls to reach out to their communities.

The project will work with girls from 5 communities, out of which 4 are the ones that FAT has already worked with. The new community that FAT is going to engage with is *Tamil basti* where the girls' literacy

levels are much worse compared to girls from other communities. Also, most mothers in the *basti* are domestic workers hence the income levels are lower than usual. Therefore, the pressure on girls from this area to get married is greater, as they are provided with lower level of education because of financial constraints.

VOW media will focus on providing trainings, skills and help the girls to use camera in a way that empowers them whereas FAT will focus on providing them workshops on women's rights and sexuality. FAT will also help the young girls to lead the campaign against early marriages in their communities at person level through conversation and at a larger level through screening of films.

Both the group of girls will explore, analyze and bring to screen the adverse affects on girl's lives that early marriages entail. This will also surface the stereotypes that community engages with when it comes to early marriages and domestic role of women.

Past Successes

Apna Haq project where girls screened films on lack of toilets in their area to the community which was received extremely well and made them think on safety and hygiene for girls. This process has made the community view them as leaders and individuals with a direction to change their circumstance. They are not waiting for their destinies to be written by their parents.

The strategy adopted for this project has been greatly influenced by Apna Haq project which has been proved to be a great success amongst the community. Therefore, having worked with the girls and the community in the past and approaching them through a similar method will lead to greater acceptability of the girls and the issue they are working with.

It is clear that while some girls have agency and can exercise it some extent, now is the time to make others realize that they possess agency to find their way and take decisions regarding their own life. We are also including a group of girls who have never had the opportunity to do so. With this project we are not only trying to help them with their development and well being but also challenging the structural problem at its roots.

What is Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT)?

Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT) is a not for profit organization that aims at empowerment of girls by enabling them to access, use and create technology through feminist rights-based framework. The mission is to empower women by enhancing women's awareness, interest and participation in technology. We work towards this by breaking societal stereotypes and attitudes, encouraging and enabling women to feel capable and comfortable in working with technology, and collaborating with other women's organizations to mainstream the issue of making technology women-centric.

FAT was created because we believe that there is an urgent need for women to become more involved in technology. Discrimination against women has, however, led to exclusion of women from technical development. Women need to be familiar with technology in order to protect themselves from the new forms of violence against women that technology brings with it, for example abuse and exploitation through Internet.

Therefore, FAT and Tech Center have become a free, safe and friendly space for young girls to explore themselves and enhance their agency, by making negotiations at home so that they can make choices regarding their own lives. This has also challenged the attitude that women can't carve out a path for themselves unless supported by male members of the family. Young girls from the Tech Center have started to enroll for higher education and jobs which earlier was unimaginable for them.

*Names have been changed to protect identities of the girls

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